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The glamorous and exciting career of Dorothy Phillips,

Navy Nurse

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For Dottie and her Navy Chief,
without whose help this book could not
have been written.

CHAPTER ONE

They say there is something about a uniform. The homeliest, most awkward man, rigged up in one, can cause feminine hearts to flutter. So when a beautiful girl like Ensign Phillips donned her Navy nurse's uniform, wolf whistles were the order of the day. The color made her blue eyes that much bluer. The gold braid and buttons and oak leaf complemented her hair. The trim tailoring fit her one hundred and fifteen pounds to perfection. And as if all this were not enough, Ensign Phillips had features and skin a poster-girl could never have surpassed.

However, if she had not been loaded down with so many packages, as well as so much beauty and charm, that unexpected and embarrassing incident would never have happened.

Ensign Phillips was just about to step down from the curb when a car whizzed around the corner. It appeared to be overflowing with members of the Air Corps, all of them flying pretty high judging from the hilarity and laughter and the manner in which the driver attacked the corner on screaming tires.

At that same moment Ensign Phillips was grabbed from the rear and yanked back on the sidewalk. The packages slipped and slid and spilled to the ground. Some burst from their wrappings. Miscellaneous articles—a few containing intimate unmentionables—were scattered in all directions. Two oranges rolled into the gutter and a proud chocolate cake was lopsidedly caved in.

The car had gone on. Though not before one of the young men had leaned precariously over its side to shout something and wigwag both arms above his head, leaving Dorothy with an impression of laughing black eyes, a flash of white teeth

in a tanned, handsome face—and a burning sensation around her heart.

Perhaps this was why she took her ruffled feelings out on the young man who was retrieving her bundles—even the one with something fluffy and pink protruding and the slippery oranges and the sad-looking cake.

"If you hadn't pulled me back so suddenly," she said, trying to recover some of the dignity belonging to an officer of the United States Navy, "I wouldn't have dropped all these things."

"If I hadn't hauled you back to safe waters you'd have been swamped by those fool landlubbers," the young man said. He wore the insignia of a first-class gunner's mate on his whites. His saucy sailor's cap was perched with an air of bravado on the back of his sandy hair. He also wore a cocky grin. He was tall and very broad through the shoulders and chest, but slender and neat through the mid-section.

"They wouldn't have run over me," she said, and added sternly, "They should be reported for driving like that."

She would have liked to put that dark young man with the devilish eyes in his proper place. It was possible he hadn't been laughing at her—he may have called out an apology—but resentment still rankled.

"Those fly boys think they can get away with anything," the sailor said. There was mild contempt and amusement in his voice. He was an exceptionally good-looking young man, if not quite as handsome as the Air Corps lieutenant. You knew this boy would look well-scrubbed even without the aid of his spotless Navy whites. And he had evidently been brought up to respect women. His arms were filled with her purchases, yet he managed a smart salute as he added, "It will be my pleasure to tote this cargo the rest of the way for you, if I may, and to escort you to whichever port you're headed for."

In spite of herself, the young ensign began to feel some of her anger oozing away. There was no need to take it out on him. After all, he had practically saved her life.

She hesitated briefly, wondering if it would be good policy to allow an enlisted man to escort her—especially one laden

down with her personal belongings. Of course he could only take her as far as the officers' launch which would take her back to the hospital ship moored about a mile from the docks of San Diego.

"I suppose it would be entirely too brassy," the gunner's mate said, with a disparaging glance from his bell-bottomed trousers to the gleaming gold eagle on her blue and white cap, "to suggest a cup of java together, if there's time before you have to report for duty."

She knew he meant that he, too, was conscious of the difference in their status. Again he wore that amused, slightly derisive grin. So that the girl was a little ashamed of having hesitated. Dorothy despised anything that hinted of snobbery; there was no room for it in the United States Navy.

Which may, or may not, have been the reason she gave him a quick smile that revealed all her dimples, and answered, "I'd love a cup of java—as you call it."

Besides, she didn't have to report to duty for several hours. Most likely she would have had to wait for the launch, anyway.

Her reward was another smart salute and a grin that spread clear across the sailor's face. It seemed to say, *I knew you were regular.* It forgave her for taking her ire out on him. It made it seem as though, instead of just having met by accident, they had known each other all their lives.

Oh, yes, this lad might not be really handsome, or carry any rank, but he had plenty on the ball, as Dorothy's school chums back home in Michigan—which sometimes seemed as far from San Diego as the North Pole from the South Pole —would have said.

Maybe homesickness also lent a contributing factor. For after they were settled in a booth in what some people would have considered a dive, but which really was quite respectable, she found herself telling this perfect stranger things about herself that she never before had confided to anyone.

Naturally they had started by exchanging names and where they were from and how long each had been in the service. Commonplace enough chitchat. But it didn't take

long—the second cups of coffee, this time with some cheese crackers for her and a couple of man-sized doughnuts for him—for them to get around to much more personal revelations.

"Sometimes I wonder why I ever joined the Navy," Dorothy said. "I'm scared silly of any body of water. I can just look over the side of a little boat and get seasick. And if I'm in the Navy the rest of my life, I'll never learn all the rules and regulations, the way to tell time, and the proper Navy terms and all."

"You won't have to," her companion said promptly and with absolute conviction. His name, he had told her when she had said the folks back home called her Dottie, and she missed being called that, was Skid. At least that was what he had been called in the small Georgia town where he had been born. His full name was Charles Henry Hale. "*You'll* never be in the Navy the rest of *your* life," he added.

The look he gave her across the small table with its somewhat soiled cloth said she was far too lovely. Some lucky guy would lure her away from the Navy—and pretty soon.

He had such an expressive face that Dorothy felt herself blushing. His eyes, sort of gray-green like the sea, were bold with admiration, yet not exactly bold. He had a lot of nerve, but he wasn't fresh. In fact, as Dorothy was rapidly discovering, Skid was a darned nice boy.

It didn't matter that he wasn't an officer. He came from a nice background. He had told her that his grandfather had been a judge; the village in Georgia, if not much more than a Main Street with its inevitable Square and Confederate Monument, had been named after his mother's family. But the big house with its white pillars and surrounding acreage had been allowed to run down, as there wasn't enough money to keep it up. There hadn't been money either for Skid to finish college. But he had known that Uncle Sam would get him, anyway.

"I guess it was because of my grandfather," Dorothy said, explaining why it was that she had chosen the Navy. "You see, Grandpa was a Lake Captain. He had an old coal freighter that could only do about six knots an hour on Lake

Michigan and up the St. Clair. The dream of his life—and its frustration—was to have been in the Navy and commanded a real boat. He was always spinning tales about the battles our Navy had fought, and as a little girl, I thought he had been a hero in every one of them." She smiled, shaking her head. She adored her grandfather, though not many people understood him; they thought he was A Character.

"Your grandfather sounds like quite a guy," Skid said, warm approval in his voice. "You did right—enlisting in the Navy. It's the best branch of the service. And the old gentleman must get a big kick out of boasting about his granddaughter, now that he hasn't much else left to brag about.

"I reckon I picked the Navy because some of my ancestors must have been pirates," Skid went on. "I never saw the ocean until after I had enlisted, but it was always in my blood. I always had a hankering for the sight and sound and smell of it."

He had been in the Navy almost six years, an old sea dog, he told her. He had been to Iceland, the Panama Canal Zone, Africa, and Japan.

"Most people think they want to see the world," he said. "Then when they have, they find that the little dot on the map where they came from is the garden spot of them all. Reminds me of that O. Henry story—remember? The one about the guy who was bragging about being a genuine cosmopolite until he overheard someone low rating his home town—then he beat the fellow up."

Ensign Phillips said she felt the same way. San Diego was a beautiful city, with its gleaming white buildings, its profusion of flowers and tropical shrubbery and trees, its wonderful climate. "But I get so homesick for Michigan," she said, "I nearly die. I even long for the ice and snow and slush. I miss having the end of my nose and ears so cold they feel as though they'd freeze and drop off. The smell of burning leaves in the fall. New life popping up all around you in the spring."

"When you've experienced things like that you're bound to miss them," Skid agreed. "All this tropical stuff seems unreal, artificial. Everyone gets homesick. The biggest, tough-

ost guys bawl for their mamas when they get hurt. When they know it's curtains, they always want to talk to someone about their home town—or their best gal."

Skid had been with those men who had been wounded, waiting, knowing they were going to die. Dorothy understood now why she could talk to him—he was the kind of person you knew you could confide in just by looking into his direct gray eyes.

Now he was saying, leaning on his elbows, chin cupped in his hands, "As for the rest, you'll get the hang of it. It's amazing how adaptable the human race is! Once you go to sea you'll get over your squeamishness. It's only a state of mind, anyhow. I get claustrophobia sometimes because my dad used to punish me by making me stay in a dark closet when I got out of line—which was pretty often when I was a kid."

She supposed he was right: everyone had certain fears and neuroses. Knowing this made you feel less ashamed of your own. It was ridiculous to be in the Navy and be afraid of water. She had almost drowned once as a child when an older playmate had pushed her off a bank into deep water. Perhaps that was why she had this particular neurosis. It may also have contributed to the reasons she had chosen the Navy—to try to overcome that fear—instead of the Army or some other branch of the services.

Thinking of this, she said, "I must admit that in many ways it's wonderful to be a Navy nurse. The excellent training of the corpsmen in hospital personnel makes a Navy nurse's duties much lighter nowadays; they're mostly supervisory."

"You can't beat the Navy," Skid agreed. "A fellow has to learn, whether he likes it or not. I took a course in radar. Now I'm on the bridge in the fire-control tower—range-finder. It's lots more interesting than swabbing decks or doing galley duty. Say!" he added, with that sudden wide grin of his, "I bet, with the help of my binoculars, I could spot you on your hospital ship."

Dorothy laughed. She said he had better not try it. Some of the Top Brass might get wise to such a procedure and he'd be in for trouble.

"*You'll* never land in the brig for breaking regulations."

Skid gave a rueful smile, thereby admitting that he had come in for his share of demerits and punishment.

"I hope not. But, as I said before, I'll never learn all I ought to know. Six months' indoctrination wasn't enough for me. I doubt if I could learn everything in six years."

"I'll teach you," he said promptly. "I'll teach you everything you'll need to know. I can't think of any assignment I'd like better."

The way he said this—and the way he looked at her—made Dorothy realize that they might be steering toward dangerous waters. They certainly seemed to have covered a lot of the hemisphere in this brief voyage. It had been fun. But that didn't mean they could do it again.

"You don't have to learn the Navy lingo," Skid said. "I like the way you talk. Like music in my ears."

She liked his Southern accent, too; there was just enough to make certain things he said sound almost like a caress. But again that wasn't good. Feminine instinct, if not logic, raised a warning head.

"As for learning time the Navy way," he was continuing, "it's simple, once you remember that naval day begins at midnight. It runs twice around the clock through twenty-four hours to the next midnight. For example, 0130 is 1.30 a.m.; 2359 is 11.59 p.m., and 1830 is 6.30 p.m."

"To me, it's about as simple as the Einstein theory," Dorothy said. However, it offered her the break she needed. She glanced at her wristwatch, reached for her purse and white gloves. "I'm sorry"—it was surprising how very true this was—"but I must be getting back. If I'm not on time, the launch—or is it called a 'gig'?—will leave without me. Then I'll get called on the mat by Captain Leonard, our chief nurse."

"Gig is usually reserved for the commanding officers' craft," Skid explained. He untangled his long legs, got up and started gathering the odd-sized bundles together. "You forget I'm seeing you to the dock, which is most likely as far as they'll allow a lowly gob to go. You know," his eyes smiled into hers once more, "I could pin a medal on those Air Corps boys for knocking you into my arms. Now, don't get me wrong, Dot. I don't fool around with women. But I've never

met one quite like you—absolutely on the square, as well as by far the prettiest anywhere around."

She didn't know what to say. All she knew was that this wouldn't do, either. An enlisted man couldn't get seriously involved with a Navy officer. It would start all kinds of gossip, and no telling what it might lead to.

But once again she was being silly. Just because Skid liked her didn't mean he'd fall in love with her.

He insisted on calling a cab, and when they arrived at the docks, he helped her out as though she were the Admiral's daughter. The docks were swarming with Navy of all ranks. Battleships, aircraft carriers, cruisers and destroyers, as well as dozens of lesser craft, were silhouetted against a cloudless blue sky. Skid steered her to the right place; at least, as far as the side of the launch from the hospital ship.

As he had foreseen, from there the boatswain's mate took over. He brushed the sailor aside as though he were an annoying insect, took charge of Ensign Phillips' belongings, and assisted her in the tricky performance of getting into the gently rocking boat.

She always had visions of losing her balance and catapulting into the water that lapped against the wharf. Or of missing her footing and breaking a leg by getting trapped between the rough planks and the polished boat rail.

However, the bos'n didn't manage to do Skid out of the last word. When he saw that she was safely aboard. Skid circled both hands around his mouth to make a megaphone. "Same place, same time, next shore leave!" It sounded more like a bugler issuing a command than a request for a lady's favor. But his gray-green eyes were as pleading as a puppy's; his nice mouth wore its most imploring grin.

Dorothy hesitated. She knew she ought to shake her head vigorously. Or pretend she hadn't heard the message clearly.

Glancing across the width of the launch, she looked smack into a pair of dark, devilish eyes. There was a flash of exceptionally white teeth in a deeply tanned, extremely handsome masculine face. It was the Air Corps lieutenant who had leaned out of the careening car to wave at her.

She had thought he was laughing at her then. She was sure he was now. No doubt he had witnessed her arrival with Skid

in tow, laden down under all that "cargo," as he had called it. Without doubt, too, the lieutenant had caught every word of the shouted message. In fact, the lieutenant appeared to be listening attentively now, to hear what the Ensign's response would be.

Dorothy deliberately turned her back on him. She stood up, forgetting to be afraid of losing her equilibrium, and waved wildly at Skid as the motor spun and sputtered and the hawser line was cast off and thrown into the boat.

She had to shout in order to be heard, but she knew she was—by both young men. "Aye, aye, sir! Same time, same place, same day next week!"

She hadn't intended to commit herself. Logic was on the side of feminine instinct. As an officer in the United States Navy, she shouldn't take orders from an enlisted man. As a sensible young woman, old enough to know better, she ought to have put an end to the whole episode right then and there.

It was partly the fault of the young lieutenant. She was aware, as she turned to sit down, that he was still looking at her. She had no idea what an Air Corps officer was doing in the hospital boat, but she told herself she didn't give a fig. She wished he were at the bottom of the ocean.

For no reason whatsoever, just his presence made Ensign Dorothy Phillips feel annoyed. You might think the lieutenant was to blame for whatever was wrong with her world. And there was nothing wrong with it.

Again, for no good reason, the whole world—Dorothy's world, at least—seemed to have taken on new beauty all of a sudden, so that it was a joy just to be alive.

CHAPTER TWO

The chocolate cake that had been transformed into such a sorry mess had been purchased for no less a personage than Captain Leonard, Chief Nurse.

Someone had unearthed the fact that the captain had a

birthday coming up today. A contribution had been taken up among the nurses and a few of the other staff; a surprise party planned. Dorothy had been elected to bring back most of the necessaries: fruit for the punch—one of the doctors had offered to "spike" it with a precious bottle of burgundy; ten-cent presents for humor—although it was a question as to how they would be received since Captain Leonard never betrayed any signs of being endowed with that characteristic; candles and paper decorations.

The surprise was to take place when, after hours, the captain was to be unsuspectingly led into the main lounge. There also was some doubt as to how the chief nurse was to be wiled into this arrangement. Captain Leonard always retired to her own quarters when off duty. She went to bed early, as she was an early riser. She never joined in any of the recreation planned on board ship for the staff. Captain Leonard never forgot that she was a stern disciplinarian, a stickler for rules, head of the younger, less experienced nurses.

"I doubt if she even relaxes in her sleep," Micky Brown said when the dispute as to whether a surprise would be appreciated or not had been under way for some time. "I think we're just wasting our hard-earned money and efforts on the old girl. It won't thaw her out one degree."

"Everyone likes to have a fuss made over them," Tommy Simms, one of the younger interns, stated. Tommy considered himself something of an authority on psychology, which he was fond of saying was *not* psychiatry, with all its Freudian trappings. "Everyone wants to be important; to love and be loved."

"Humph!" one of the other nurses sniffed. "If Captain Leonard loves anyone, or anything, she sure keeps it a deep, dark secret."

"I hear she has a nephew she's nuts about," someone else remarked knowingly. "He's a pilot, and has won The Purple Heart and the Silver Star, and all kinds of honors."

"Maybe so, but if so, I'd like to see said nephew in the flesh," Micky said. "Seeing is believing, you know. I'll contribute my few bucks, and my winning presence, but I'm willing to take on all bets as of here and now that this surprise party will turn out to be one big flop."

Nevertheless, they had finally agreed to have it. A good many of the staff respected Captain Leonard and her ability, if they couldn't draw any warmth from her august person, or give much in return.

And now, as Dorothy told Micky, who shared her cabin, if the party didn't turn out to be a success, it would be her, Dorothy's, fault.

"What can we do about the cake?" she wailed in genuine distress. "We can't present it, all decked out in candles, looking like the Leaning Tower of Pisa."

She had told Micky part of what had taken place that day during her shore leave—but not everything. She had left out Skid, purposely, and a bit guiltily. Micky was a great tease, and her Irish humor sometimes was wicked. Dorothy was fond of her, but she was careful to escape her gibes. Micky was always getting into trouble, which was one reason she didn't get on too well with the chief nurse.

"If I had time," Micky returned flippantly, "I'd whip up another cake. As it is, darling, this cake will have to do. Maybe we can put more candles on one side," she suggested hopefully, "so that the weight will sorta shift."

Dorothy didn't believe that would repair the damage. Yet when the cake was ready, enthroned on its large silver platter and topped with lighted points of flame from the small candles, it actually did look nice.

Everyone was assembled in the lounge, whispering and giggling and trying to keep as quiet as possible until the door would open and Captain Leonard, accompanied by Tommy Simms, would walk in. Tommy had been selected because, with his knowledge of human nature and its many quirks, it had been thought that he would be the best man to undertake this rather ticklish task.

Dorothy was also thinking that the blue-and-gold paper decorations strung around the lounge looked quite festive, the presents were gift-wrapped—and besides the nonsensical ones, she had bought an attractive fitted bag—so perhaps the party would go off fairly well, after all.

When the door opened, there was someone else with Dr. Simms and Captain Leonard; another young man, resplendent in the dress uniform of the Navy Air Corps.

Dorothy caught her breath. So audibly that Micky, at her elbow, glanced around to see if her cabinmate had suddenly been overcome by lack of oxygen. "What the heck gives?" she whispered. Then, her own hazel eyes widening, she added, "Zowie! My Sainted Aunt Carrie! He *is* a knockout, isn't he? What a hunk of man! Couldn't be he could be that prize nephew, could it now?"

"Sh-hhh . . . " Dorothy warned, just in time for all of them to shout in rehearsed unison: "Happy Birthday! Happy Birthday to you, Captain Leonard!"

The chief nurse pulled up short. She appeared to grow at least several inches taller—the captain was stout but carried her weight well, as she had the height for it and a carriage any King's Guardsman might have envied; she looked around, her black eyes blinking; then she made an elegant Navy salute and smiled broadly. Really smiled.

It was the first time most of those assembled had ever seen Captain Leonard smile. A long sigh of relief could be heard throughout the room. Then a hullabaloo broke forth, laughter and chattering, congratulations and well-wishes, introductions and explanations. Captain Leonard's smile had broken the ice and the success of her birthday party already was assured.

"Let's form in line," Micky said, tugging at Dorothy's arm. "We gotta be properly introduced to said nephew. No gal worth her salt could let an opportunity like this pass. Isn't he by far the handsomest, the most dashing aviator you ever laid your eyes on, Dot? Ah, for just one glance from those dark eyes of his, one smile!"

"Be sensible!" Dorothy scolded, biting her lip, and trying to wrench loose from Micky's grasp. "I don't want to meet him. What I mean is, I already have—in a way." She could have bitten off her tongue.

"What!" Micky shrieked, her hazel eyes almost popping out of her pretty head. There was no stopping her now. "Hear ye, hear ye!" she cried, above the din, pulling Dorothy forcibly along with her as she approached Captain Leonard and the circle that had formed around her. "Make way—clear the gangway! It seems Ensign Phillips, at my right," she had lowered her voice a trifle now that the two nurses were face

to face with the chief nurse and the young man who stood by her side, "and your nephew already are acquainted, Captain Leonard. But I still have that pleasure coming to me, so, being a forward and frank young woman, here I—I mean here we are."

"So I observe," Captain Leonard returned, eyeing the two nurses in her usual severe manner. "If only you were as fervent in your duties, Ensign Brown, as you are frank and forward!" She turned toward the other nurse. "I was not aware that anyone on board ship knew my nephew, Ensign Phillips."

Dorothy didn't know what to say. She felt the hot color flooding her face. Captain Leonard had no use for anyone who variated even the slightest degree from the truth. Yet how could she stand up and say that it was all a mistake, that she had never known the chief nurse's nephew, but had only—

"Oh, we are old, old buddies!" The young lieutenant saved the situation. "We met aeons ago, didn't we, Ensign Phillips? So long ago I've forgotten just where it was or when. But of course that doesn't mean that I could ever forget *you!*" He took a step forward, bowed from the waist, and raised Dorothy's hand gallantly to his lips. "And naturally I am delighted to renew our long friendship once more."

There was nothing to do but fall in with his play-acting. However, she didn't appreciate it, even if it had, perhaps, saved her face. She tried to force a smile. But the look she gave him would have struck down a weaker man. He might have a lot of medals and ribbons, quite a display, in fact, but he also had a lot of conceit. Though to be fair, Micky was also partly to blame for this ridiculous situation; Micky, who now was fairly throwing herself at the young lieutenant's extremely handsome head. While everyone else, including Tommy Simms, stood by watching. Tommy was sunk, as far as Micky was concerned. She could wind him around her little finger. He wouldn't concede this, as it was human frailty and above the dignity of a young medico. But Tommy's face was as grim and white as Dorothy's had been red.

As the evening wore on, Micky continued to make a play for Lieutenant Keith Cameron's attention. It was quite obvious that young Cameron was the apple of his aunt's eye. To every-

one's amazement, Captain Leonard not only thawed out, but entered into the spirit of things wholeheartedly. She placed a silly paper hat on top of her carefully waved gray hair, tooted a horn, and accepted all the banter good-naturedly.

It turned out that the lieutenant, along with his other accomplishments, could play the piano. In fact, he could play any number, old or new, that anyone requested of him. So a group gathered around to sing lustily; others pushed back the furniture to dance. And the chief nurse even danced twice with one of the older doctors.

When Ensign Phillips went to fetch the presents she discovered Lieutenant Cameron at her heels. He took the basket away from her, his dark eyes laughing into hers.

"You aren't treating me very well," he told her, "considering we're such old pals. You've deliberately avoided me all evening. Aren't you afraid people will notice, and start imagining things? You know the scuttlebutt on board any ship. They'll think we were much more than mere friends. They'll think we had a lovers' quarrel and now—"

"Do you have to continue this ridiculous farce?" she interrupted. She would have swept past him, but he blocked the way. "You know we never saw each other before today, when you and those other crazy airmen tried to run me down."

"But we're stuck with it now—this farce, as you call it," Keith reminded her. "We'll have to keep it up until the third act, at least. I tried to get Hank to stop—he *is* a crazy driver—but he was late reporting back as it was. I tried to yell and tell you how sorry I was to have scared you half-silly. Darn' near broke my fool neck."

"I wish you had," Dorothy said icily. "And I was *not* scared silly."

"Thanks to that lucky sailor boy!" the lieutenant put in with a knowing grin.

She started to say something, but found herself stumped, as before, for the right retort.

"Surely," he said now, with another look deep into her eyes, "you'll be big enough—if only for the sake of our long friendship and the fact that we certainly might well have become sweethearts if the opportunity had presented itself—

to forgive me, won't you? Aunt Nettie would think it most uncharitable of you, Ensign Phillips, if you didn't."

She felt like saying she didn't give a fig what his aunt thought. Nettie was an odd first name for the chief nurse. So plain, sort of countrified. And of course, because she was chief nurse, Dorothy had to care what the older woman thought of her.

"Will you kindly let me pass?" she said stonily. "And there is nothing to forgive."

"That's better!" he said. "Now, since you've forgiven me, why don't you start treating me nicer? You might begin by giving me a smile, though I must admit you're mighty pretty when your eyes send off sparks like that. I'll bet you're even beautiful in the morning when reveille catches you with your hair done up in pin-curls and your face smeared with cold cream."

She could have told him that her hair was naturally curly and she didn't use any creams, either, but all she wanted was to end this interview. The others would be waiting for the climax of the evening—the basket with the gifts. They would also, by this time, be well aware that Ensign Phillips and Lieutenant Cameron were engaged in intimate conversation in a far corner of the big lounge.

"We're delaying the party," she said, giving the chief nurse's nephew another chilling look. "Since I hope never to see you again after this evening, what does it matter what you think of me or how I treat you, Lieutenant? Kindly let me by —and if you don't want to carry the basket, I'll do it myself or find someone who will."

"You don't suppose I'd let a gunner's mate outdo me in chivalry, do you?" He threw back his handsome head to laugh aloud at this. "Or put me out of the running. I promise you, you'll be seeing a lot of me after this evening—"

But Dorothy had taken advantage of that moment when he was off guard. She ducked under his arms, raised to hold the basket, and broke the blockade.

As she walked across the room she decided that not only had these last few minutes been observed by practically everyone present, but her final maneuver hadn't been lost on many, especially Micky.

Her interested stare and impish grin were proof enough. Even Captain Leonard's keen dark eyes regarded the young nurse with a new appraisal that had nothing to do with rules and regulations. She seemed to be sizing Ensign Phillips up for reasons of her own. As her nephew, who had followed meekly enough this time in the ensign's wake, set the big basket down, the chief nurse said:

"What have you two young people been up to now? And what on earth have you got here?"

"We've been renewing auld lang syne," Keith returned promptly. "Have to make up from here on for lost time, don't we, Dottie? But as for what's in this very heavy basket, that's out of my department. You'll have to ask Ensign Phillips, Aunt Nettie."

Before Dorothy had time to answer, everyone, in chorus, called out, "Surprise! Surprise!"

"For me!" Captain Leonard drew herself up once more to her full majestic height. But she didn't look at all displeased. She allowed herself to be seated in a chair, where she proceeded to open each present, amid more clowning and laughter. She took all this in stride, too. A sense of humor apparently was hidden deep down somewhere in that ample bosom. Then when she came to the leather fitted bag with a card on which Dorothy had written, *Many More Happy Returns to our own Chief Nurse from all the nurses who respect and admire her so much*—well, Keith Cameron's Aunt Nettie actually had an almost sentimental gleam in her dark eyes She couldn't thank them enough. She said she wanted everyone to know how much she appreciated the entire party. It was a tremendous surprise, and she couldn't recall when she had had such a pleasant one. Nor celebrated a birthday.

"I'm too old for that," she wound up her speech. "Nevertheless, I enjoyed it immensely. So once more, I want to thank each one of you. And I shall remember this occasion the rest of my days."

There was hearty applause; then everyone began to talk at once. It was unanimously agreed that the party had, indeed, been a huge success.

In the confusion, Dorothy decided to sneak off, unobserved. Had anyone asked her, she would have said that the

party had been a mistake, almost a fiasco. Because of the presence of a certain young lieutenant who thought the world was his own prize oyster.

Because of his aunt, she had unwittingly put herself more or less at his mercy. She would never forgive him. She told herself she despised him, and everything he stood for. He was a snob—for example, what he had said about Skid. Dorothy decided to keep that date next leave with the gunner's mate, whether she was acting wisely or not. He—Keith, not Skid—was a spoiled, egotistical, arrogant, impossible person—a fly boy, as far as brains went too, and as Skid labeled the lofty Air Corps.

It was too bad, Dorothy summed up the whole business, that he was so terrifically good looking.

CHAPTER THREE

Although she had been attached to the hospital ship, her first transfer after indoctrination, for more than a year, Dorothy had never ceased to be amazed at the facilities here. It had all the up-to-the-minute equipment of any modern hospital: laboratory, operating theater, X-ray department, isolation ward. It also had all the conveniences of a first-class hotel: drug store, café, barber and beauty shop, laundry, solarium and lounges. Besides these, there were the kitchens and dining rooms, linen rooms and storerooms, offices for the staff, and a radio department.

The only difference was that this hospital was moored to a buoy in the bay instead of being firmly entrenched in the ground. Its floors were called decks, the walls were bulkheads, the ceilings, overheads. Stairs were never stairs; they were ladders. And the openings from one deck to the other were hatches. There was a bow and a stern, a port and a starboard side. On each of these was a large red cross, and the ship was painted white. Announcements and reveille and taps were called out over a loud-speaker. A Navy Line Offi-

cer was responsible for the ship and its crew, the senior medical officer for the care of patients, welfare and assignment of duties to doctors, nurses and hospital corpsmen.

The duties of a Navy nurse, as she had told Skid, were not too arduous, at least when anchored in a home port and not engaged in maneuvers or wartime activities. They consisted mostly of supervision, giving medication and therapy, minor surgery. There had been an epidemic of measles and mumps, a few viruses and pneumonia, now and then a broken arm or leg. Once a helicopter had brought an emergency appendectomy case and another time there had been a more serious emergency when a plane had crashed at sea. Of course if the ship received orders for foreign duty, things would be different, they might really "begin to hum," as Micky said.

Micky was thoroughly disgusted with the monotony of this assignment. She often remarked that she hadn't joined the Navy to listen to patients complain, take temperatures every four hours and hand out pills and capsules. She wanted excitement.

Dorothy tried to tell her that if the next orders were to follow the Pacific fleet into a war zone there might be too much excitement and drama.

"Of course it's easy to understand," Micky remarked sagely one evening a few nights after the surprise party, as the two girls were getting ready for bed, "why you're satisfied with things as they are here in San Diego. If I were in your boots, I suppose I'd be walking on clouds too."

"What boots?" Dorothy asked, easing out of her white Oxfords which, at the end of a day's duty, especially with all the intricate corridors and passageways and ascents and descents on a big ship, seemed twice their normal size.

"You needn't keep on trying to keep your love life such a deep, dark secret from me," her cabinmate said loftily. Micky stood up so suddenly that she bumped her red head against the bottom of the top bunk. The cabin had a two-decker bunk —Micky occupied the top one—a couple of folding iron chairs, a set of bureau drawers—and just enough floor space to turn around in.

"What do you mean by that?" Dorothy asked, after Micky, rubbing her head, had mumbled a few less intelligible words.

"You know what I mean! Not that you breathed so much as a syllable—and me, thinking all this time I was your closest girl friend!" Micky sat down again, more carefully this time, wrapped her quilted robe around her and tried to look aggrieved.

Dorothy had been skirting any mention of Lieutenant Cameron since the night of the party. She hadn't seen him since. And hoped, as she had told him, she never would again.

"I never dreamed you could be so sly, Dottie," Micky teased. "And to think you wouldn't even confide in me, or ask my advice."

"I have nothing to confide," Dorothy said, as she began to brush her hair. "And if I needed advice, Micky, I'd certainly ask you for it."

"You'll need it before you're finished." Micky wagged her head. "It's never good policy to play one man against another."

"Two men!"

"Yes, two—and don't look so innocent." Micky succeeded in looking very wise. "I know all about that seaman, too—the lieutenant told me. How you slip off every shore leave to meet him and—"

"Why, I do nothing of the sort!" Dorothy was so indignant that the hairbrush almost slipped out of her hand. "I don't know what Lieutenant Cameron told you, but whatever it was it wasn't true."

"Part of it was." Micky giggled. "He told me he was terribly disappointed because you slipped off right after the party without even saying good night. You certainly missed a golden opportunity, Dot. There was a full moon, and it was simply heavenly out on deck. You see, I know, because when you didn't show up, the lieutenant accepted me as a substitute. We talked for ages, though not nearly long enough. I was afraid, even if he *is* Captain Leonard's precious nephew, I'd get in Dutch if I stayed out too late . . . I do hope you don't mind, darling."

"I don't mind in the least."

Yet in one way she did mind. Goodness knows, with his powers for creating fairy tales, what Lieutenant Cameron

might have told Micky. Dorothy was reminded of how her grandfather could make things up and exaggerate molehills into mountains. Only with the lieutenant there was no excuse for doing it.

"Of course," Micky said, clasping her hands around her knees and looking dreamily at the ceiling, "the talk was mostly about you. Keith wanted to know all I knew about you—"

"I hope you didn't tell him anything!"

"I only told him what you've told me yourself—and what I've learned from rooming with you for over a year, darling."

Dorothy had kept her thoughts pretty much to herself—but in Micky's hands there was no telling.

"And he told me how he felt about you," Micky continued, giving another wistful sigh. "He's certainly fallen for you in a big way. He said he knew, from the first second he laid eyes on you—how long ago was that, Dot?—that you were the girl for him. He says now, in spite of this sailor of yours, he'll never give up. Oh, he's got it something awful! And he's simply divine, so good looking in that dark, virile way—and such a hero, an ace pilot with heaven knows how many planes to his credit. And besides all that, just look at the way he can make a piano talk!"

Dorothy didn't care what he could do. She could have choked him, gladly, for talking about her to Micky as he had.

"And he makes love divinely, too," Micky went on, more dreamy-eyed than before. "When it finally came time to say good night I felt so sorry for him I told him he could kiss me good night, if he wanted to. I was sure you wouldn't mind, Dottie."

"Of course I don't mind—why should I?" her cabinmate demanded. Anger, the kind that only this special young man could cause, rose like a flame inside of her. She tried to tell herself he wasn't worth getting angry about. It would be better to feel entirely indifferent to him. "Lieutenant Cameron is nothing to me," she stated firmly. "He never has been. He never will be."

"I wouldn't make such a positive, and rash, statement," Micky advised. "If he's ever kissed you, and I suppose he has, you'll never forget it, darling! And although, to be per-

fectly honest, I wish he'd get over this mad infatuation for you, I'd advise you to grab him if you can."

Dorothy knew that Keith Cameron wasn't infatuated with her at all. He had simply been pulling Micky's leg. And laughing at her, Dorothy, as he had from the beginning.

If she ever did see him again, Dorothy resolved that she would tell him exactly what she thought of him—in case what she had told him before hadn't sunk in.

As he had remarked to her, the scuttlebutt on a boat was "something." It had a way of spreading and growing until it bore not the slightest resemblance to the truth.

It was the next morning that Ensign Phillips was approached in regard to this same topic by none other than the chief nurse herself.

She had been summoned into Captain Leonard's office, presumably to receive some new orders in connection with her duties.

The chief nurse had given the orders and Dorothy was about to leave, one hand on the doorknob, when Captain Leonard stopped her.

"By the way, Ensign Phillips, I cannot help being pleased that you know my nephew."

Dorothy was so startled she didn't know what to say. She blushed, inclined her head slightly, murmured something quite unintelligible. This was the price for telling even a small, harmless fib, as she was rapidly learning.

"Keith is such a fine boy," his aunt said proudly. "Of course, having no mother—my sister died when Keith was only a small boy—he is inclined to be—well, shall we say, a bit spoiled?"

Dorothy could have agreed with that—even that it was an understatement as to what this particular young man was. However, she knew that while his aunt could say Keith was spoiled, she would be furious to hear anyone else say it.

So once more she said nothing, and tried to force a slight smile.

"Naturally," his fond aunt was saying, "I am very proud of Keith. I have felt all along that what he needed most—every man, for that matter—was the influence of some good woman." She paused here, looking the young nurse firmly

in the eye. Dorothy felt the color deepening in her face. "I have tried, in my limited way, and with what time I could spare from my life's work, to help Keith. As he grew up, that is. Naturally I realize, now that he is a young man, that someone else—some woman of his own generation—ought to take over."

Where on earth, Dorothy wondered, was all this leading? Surely Captain Leonard wasn't trying to appoint her as some sort of guardian for her nephew. If so, she would refuse with all the firmness she could muster.

"Which brings us back to your long friendship with Keith," the chief nurse resumed. Her manner had remained her severe, authoritative one; yet there had been an almost tender glint in her black eyes.

Dorothy was thinking that those dark eyes were the only resemblance between Captain Leonard and her nephew. In every other way, they were as different as a bitter cold morning in January and a bright warm one in June.

She was too absorbed in this thought to give anything more than another slight smile. Besides, how could she deny the length of that mythical friendship without admitting that she was a liar? As Keith had said, she was stuck with this farce until the third act.

"I know you will be a good influence on the boy," the aunt of this grown-up young man was saying. Men never grow up in some women's eyes. "I am pleased that his choice is a young woman of whom I can approve—and I consider you a very fine young woman, Ensign Phillips, as well as a most capable nurse." Here the chief nurse paused to give the young nurse her frosty smile and, no doubt, to allow what she had said to sink in.

Dorothy was impressed all right. So impressed that she was speechless. She tried to stammer something, knowing her face was scarlet now, and feeling like a perfect idiot. Yet, on the other hand, she was pleased at such unexpected praise from Captain Leonard. She finally managed to say, "Why—why, thank you. It's very—very good of you to say so. I—I try to do my best."

The chief nurse apparently took this to imply that Ensign

Phillips had just agreed to "do her best" for Lieutenant Cameron.

"Thank you—I knew I could count on you," Captain Leonard said. Her stern mouth wore a well-pleased expression. "That will be all then, Ensign Phillips." She dismissed the young nurse with a curt gesture, but she rose from her chair to come around the desk and rest one hand lightly on the younger woman's sleeve, as though giving her an approving pat.

Dorothy was glad to escape.

She felt guilty. Certainly she had no intention of helping the captain's nephew in any way whatsoever; she also felt confused and angry—this last, as usual, toward said nephew.

And as though it wasn't bad enough, just as she opened a hatch to descend to the lower deck she almost bumped into Dr. Thomas Simms, coming up.

"Ah," the young intern said, as though he had come upon an object he had been searching for, "it's you, Dottie. May I have a word with you, please?"

Dorothy saw no reason, at this point, to refuse. She was to wish she had.

"It's—er—it's about Micky. In a way. But then again, it's about you. And—er—that young lieutenant. You know—the one who's related to the chief nurse."

"Not again!" she could have groaned. But Tommy looked so distressed, his soft brown eyes filled with so much misery, that she relented and asked him what it was he wanted to know.

"Are you going to marry the lieutenant?" Tommy asked.

"Certainly not!"

"Oh." His face fell at least an inch. "I was hoping you were."

"I fail to see why," she said.

"So he'll leave Micky alone," Tommy explained. He sounded quite desperate.

Dorothy felt like retorting, *You mean so Micky will leave the lieutenant alone.* But she felt much too sorry for Tommy to say it.

"I saw them," Tommy said darkly.

"Saw them?"

"Yeah, the other night."

Dorothy thought she saw a glimmer of light She recalled what Micky had told her about staying out on deck in the moonlight so long.

"I wouldn't let it get me down, if I were you, Tommy." She tried to offer a small crumb of comfort. Poor Tommy, he surely was sunk when it came to the redheaded nurse. And Micky did her darnedest to give him a hard time. She claimed he was too serious for her; that she would never think of marrying a doctor. Yet Dorothy wondered if, deep in her heart, Micky didn't care for the young medico.

"They were smooching," Tommy said glumly. "Kissing each other. I saw them with my own eyes." He looked as if suicide might be his only recourse.

"Oh, you know a kiss or so doesn't mean anything," Dorothy said airily. "At least most people don't think it does in this progressive age."

"Civilization is doomed," Tommy said dully.

"Besides," Dorothy searched for words to make Tommy feel better, "you know Micky. She goes for every new and handsome face. She likes to flirt, but never means anything by it. I seriously believe she likes you a lot, Tommy."

"She has a peculiar way of showing it if she does," the young psychologist said gloomily.

"She just doesn't know it yet herself," Dorothy explained with a feminine insight no mere man could ever achieve, no matter how many books he studied. She gave Tommy a bright smile. "Please believe me, Tommy. Don't give up. Some fine day Micky'll wake up and realize you are worth at least a dozen Air Corps lieutenants!"

"Do you actually subscribe to that theory?" Tommy's tone remained dubious, but his face had brightened a shade at least.

"I most emphatically do!"

"Then you'll help me," he said, his soft brown eyes taking on their eager-beaver expression that he reserved for research as a rule.

"Well, I—I don't know just how I can" Dorothy began to think she had said too much.

"You can!" His thin face was alight now. He grabbed both

of Dorothy's hands. "You must! You will! All you have to do is keep the lieutenant away from Micky. He prefers you anyway. That was quite evident the night of the party. He didn't pay the least bit of attention to Micky that night—not until she got him alone. So don't let that happen again. That isn't much to ask, now is it?"

Maybe not, but it was more than she had bargained for. She had told Micky that she was welcome to Lieutenant Keith Cameron. But she had just practically given her word to his aunt that she would keep an eye on her nephew and guide him into the right path. And now here was Tommy . . .

"Okay. I'll do what I can." Dorothy couldn't think of any other way to satisfy him.

"You will? I knew you would. You're a perfect peach." The young doctor squeezed her hands so hard he almost bruised them. "I won't worry any more. I leave it all in your hands. If the time should ever come when Micky decides she might do worse than marry me, I shall owe my—my happiness to you."

"Goodness!" Dorothy exclaimed, withdrawing her numb hands from his grasp. "I'm not sure I could possibly accomplish all that, Tommy. I only promised—"

But Tommy was already out of earshot. Dorothy felt as though she had just signed her life away. She shouldn't be such a softy, she scolded herself, giving out promises as though they grew on trees. For, besides believing that the best policy was to stick to the truth, she believed that when a person gave his word to someone else he should do his level best to live up to it.

CHAPTER FOUR

Dorothy wasn't prepared, when she stepped off the gig onto the dock, to find the lieutenant standing there, his dark eyes laughing down at her, looking handsomer than ever, if this were possible, in his dress whites.

"What are you doing here?" she demanded, not too politely, feeling anger beginning to churn with her.

She made quite an attractive picture, herself, in her trim white uniform, white blouse and black tie, her hat with its white top and navy-blue brim perched jauntily atop her golden curls.

"Waiting for you—reason enough, I'd say," Keith replied. "My, don't we look gorgeous, all rigged up in our best! Always thought you Navy nurses were turned out mighty smart—but I never saw one do as much justice to the outfit as you, my love."

He had fallen into step beside her, for Ensign Phillips, after her first question, had started to stalk on her way. She held her pretty head high and looked straight ahead. She didn't answer his remarks, which she took for so much soft-soap, anyway. He was the sort of young man to hand every girl he talked with a line. Look how he had made love to Micky . . .

Perhaps, Dorothy decided, the burning sensation inside her kindling further, if she ignored him, he would leave her alone.

"I had to be on deck," the lieutenant was saying, "to make sure you kept your appointment with that sailor boy."

She maintained her silence and tried to increase her speed, but she was walking as fast as her high heels would let her. She had intended to walk all the way to the little restaurant where she was to meet Skid. It wasn't far, and the day was lovely and warm, yet with a refreshing breeze from the ocean. But if Lieutenant Cameron persisted in walking with her, it might be wiser to take a cab.

"You ought to be grateful to me," her companion said. "You might not reach your destination safely if I weren't on hand to steer a safe course for you. You know you have a habit of nearly getting yourself run over."

As he said this, he reached out to grasp her arm. Dorothy had started to step down off the curb, intending to look in every direction for a taxi.

The lieutenant had restrained the young ensign in the nick of time. A boy on a bicycle pedaled furiously around the cor-

ner, his head bent against the wind. Anyone in his path would have to look out for himself.

"You see!" Keith exclaimed. "It's not safe for you to be out alone. It's certainly a good thing I'm around to look out for you."

Dorothy had to bite her lip to keep from retorting. He was still laughing at her, and she felt like an idiot. The only reason she hadn't seen the boy on the bike had been because she was practically seeing "red."

She tried to tell herself that she shouldn't let the lieutenant make her so angry. He just wasn't worth it. Why should she allow him to get her so upset? Then she remembered that she had wanted to see him just one more time, in order to set him straight.

"I suppose," he said, as they resumed their walk, "as soon as I turn you over to your gunner's mate, I'll have to blow."

"Not at all," she said coolly. "We'd both be delighted to have you join us."

"You don't say!" He gave a low chuckle. "I hope you're speaking for yourself. I'm sure you're not speaking for the sailor boy."

"When he hears what I have to say to you, I'm sure Skid will enjoy listening."

"I'll take my chances on that," Keith returned. And then, "So his name is Skid. If you call him that, why don't you try calling me 'Keith,' Dottie? We've been friends for a long, long time, you know."

Since she couldn't call him the names she might have liked to, not having the proper ones in her vocabulary, she made no reply to this. Besides, they were almost at their destination. She hoped Skid would be waiting for her. It would be awful if he weren't there. She felt certain that only "hell and high water," as Micky might have put it, could keep him away. However, changes in orders and shore leaves could quite conceivably happen in the Navy.

When she saw Skid's big rangy figure in its Navy blues, his wholesome, if not quite handsome, face, her relief was so great that she almost overdid her greeting.

"Skid—how wonderful to see you again! I hope I haven't

kept you waiting long!" She hurried toward him, extending both hands. If she had had the nerve of her cabinmate she would have thrown both arms around Skid's neck and given him a big hug.

Skid appeared almost overcome by such warmth, so perhaps it was just as well Dorothy remained true to her own pattern. His face lighted up as though a bulb had been switched on, and he grinned from ear to ear.

"You know I don't mind waiting—for you," he said. "Gosh, it's wonderful to see you again, Dottie!" Then, since Skid couldn't help seeing the tall Air Corps officer behind her, the light went out of his face—as though the switch had suddenly been snapped off.

Turning her head slightly, Dorothy nodded to include the lieutenant. "I hope you don't mind, Skid, that necessity forced me to bring Lieutenant Cameron along. I assured him it would be all right with you. You see, I have a few things to say to him that I thought you might like to hear." Dorothy was smiling now, a woman's superior smile when she knows she has not only one but two young men at her mercy.

She proceeded to introduce the two men. Keith might have offered his hand, but Skid beat him to it by giving the officer a perfunctory, and somehow not too courteous, salute. Since a sailor didn't have to salute an officer off duty, Skid's manner of doing so seemed to say that he performed the tiresome act with more amusement than deference.

Dorothy led the way to the booth where she and Skid had sat the other time. She sat down squarely in the middle of the seat on her side so that the two young men would be obliged to sit opposite, facing her.

She was beginning to get quite a "kick" out of this, after all. They both now looked ill-at-ease. Most of the laughter had vanished from the lieutenant's dark eyes and Skid wore his embarrassed, uncertain grin. It was evident neither one knew what she was up to.

"Shall we order first?" Dorothy took charge of the situation. She intended to make the most of it. She anticipated enjoying it very much. "I think I'll have the spaghetti and meat balls," she said, scanning the menu which the waitress, a young girl who had served them before, had placed on the

table. She hadn't intended to order a full dinner, but why not? "I'll have a tossed green salad, too," she added. "And I believe I'd like the shrimp cocktail first, followed by onion soup. And of course I'll want dessert and coffee—but I'll wait and order those later." She smiled brightly across the table at both young men.

She suddenly found that her appetite called for this abundance. She could eat everything she had ordered and enjoy every bit of it. A person got tired of the food served at mess. This should be a real treat.

Men, as a rule, were the ones with large appetites. However, after looking over the menu for some time, Skid finally said he guessed he'd just start off with the onion soup. He might take a hamburger later. Then Keith told the waitress that as he wasn't hungry he would just have coffee for the time being.

"I'm a great hand for coffee," he explained. "Drink it all the time."

"Really?" Dorothy raised her nicely arched eyebrows. "I didn't suppose, Lieutenant, you ever took anything as mild as coffee. Just imagine—coffee for a great big war hero! Why, if you'd ordered grape juice or tea, I couldn't be more surprised."

Without saying so, her tone implied that Dorothy believed the lieutenant to be anything but a teetotaler. And, again without saying so, this conclusion had been arrived at, her sweet smile seemed to add, with good and substantial cause.

"I believe I'll have a beer with my burger," Skid said. "That is, if you don't mind, Dottie."

"Mind? Why should I begrudge you a nice cold mug of beer, Skid!" Dorothy smiled on the gunner's mate again, a smile that showed her delightful dimples. "You've always had beer whenever we're together—for as long as I can remember, Skid."

Skid looked at her for a long, questioning moment. Then apparently he decided that although he didn't know what she meant, since they had only been together once before and he hadn't had any beer, he'd string along with whatever she had up her sleeve.

"Sure thing!" His grin was a much more relaxed one now.

Maybe he wasn't the third party in this threesome, after all. He had had a jolt. But he might have known Dottie was too swell a girl to pull a fast one on him. She must have brought the "airedale" along for reasons of her own.

"Just how long, if I may inquire," the lieutenant put in, "have you two known each other? I may have been mistaken, but I was under the impression that you met, quite by 'accident,' a week ago today."

"That just goes to show," Dorothy said, "how misleading impressions can be." She gave Skid's long legs a slight kick under the table and smiled once more into his somewhat puzzled eyes. "Why, Skid and I have been friends, *very* good friends," her tone accenting this into as much more as any listener cared to make out of it, "for as long almost as I can remember—haven't we, Skid?"

At least, she crossed her fingers, hoping to excuse this fabrication, she felt as though she had known Skid that long. She had felt that way from the first time they had talked together and she had told him things about herself she had never told anyone else.

"Sure thing," Skid said again. He was still in the dark. But if Dorothy wanted this fly boy to think they had known one another all their lives, it was hunky-dory with Skid. He hoped to make this true for the rest of his life, anyhow.

Dorothy was thinking that this was paying Lieutenant Cameron back in good measure for all the things he had said to Micky about her; trying to put her on the spot. Let him think she dated Skid every shore leave, as Keith had told Micky. Let the lieutenant think, if he chose, that she was in love with the sailor—even that she might one day decide to marry him!

"I see," the young officer said now. The blank expression on his good-looking young face did not give evidence that he did. "I must say that comes as a surprise to me. Did you grow up in Michigan, too?" He addressed the gunner's mate. Adding, with a little of the laughter creeping back into his dark eyes, "I can't quite place your Southern accent, old boy. Another mistake on my part, I presume."

"Who said we had to be raised in the same town?" Dorothy asked with a supercilious air. "I visited down South when I

was a little girl." This was true—in a way. Dorothy's grandfather had once taken her as far south as Cincinnati. Which had been as far in that direction as she had got until her transfer to Southern California.

"Hum . . ." Keith mused. Again he addressed Skid. "And no doubt you visited up N'oth, too? A childhood romance, I gather. A puppy-love affair."

"For your information," Dorothy said, without having planned on going to such an extreme, "it is much more than that. Skid and I are—well, practically engaged, aren't we, Skid?"

It must have been the deeply seated fires of anger that had driven her to tell a Great Big One like that. Or maybe the ensign had something of her grandpa in her make-up, after all.

Skid gave a gulp and rose to the occasion like a man. "Sure thing," he said. He realized that more than that one phrase might be required. Not just because it sounded kind of dumb to repeat, but a guy ought to display more eloquence upon being informed that he was engaged to the most beautiful, most wonderful girl on the globe. Naturally he knew that this engagement wasn't actually true. But if Dorothy wanted Cameron to think they were, that suited Skid to a T.

Leaning both elbows on the table, and cupping his chin in his hands—a habit of his—Skid gave Dorothy his very nicest grin and said, "Dottie and I will be getting married one of these days soon."

After that whopper, Skid had to take a long hard swallow again.

"I suppose," the lieutenant endeavored to rise to the occasion, not wanting an ordinary enlisted man to outdo him in manners, "I should offer congratulations and well wishes and all that sort of thing." But Keith knew, being a bright boy, as his fond aunt would have said, that there was more here than met the eye. Something fishy.

"Thank you," Dorothy said demurely. She felt good. She was glad she had told that big fib. She would whiten it by explaining later on to Skid, although she didn't know just what her explanation would be.

"Yes, thanks a lot, Lieutenant." The sailor gave the officer a grin that was quite superior this time.

"Just call me Keith," the other young man said generously. He offered the gunner's mate his hand again, and this time Skid could not very well refuse it. The two shook hands gravely with Dorothy, sitting across from them, watching.

There was a brief silence.

Dorothy had finished all she could manage of the spaghetti and meat balls—it seemed her eyes had been bigger than her stomach, after all. Skid had consumed his hamburger and beer. Keith had had his second cup of coffee.

It was he who summoned the waitress again.

"This calls for a celebration," he declared, his dark eyes laughing once more. "It ought to be champagne, but I insist on a bottle of wine, at least. We must drink a toast—to the bride-to-be."

To himself, Keith added, *Mine, by gum, no matter what or how long it takes!* For it was true, what he had told Micky—he had fallen in love with her cabinmate the moment he had caught that tantalizing first glimpse of her. There she had stood, starting to cross the street. A face that would stop any man. And the same sort of figure. His heart had almost stopped when the car, driven by that crazy Hank, had practically run her down. He had leaned out, not only to call an apology, but to make certain that this one girl was the most beautiful, the most desirable he had ever hoped to meet.

He had managed to meet her again—by accident. And now that she had not only given him the cold-shoulder treatment, but had announced that she was going to throw herself away by marrying an enlisted man, Keith knew it was love.

He was not a snob, at least not much more so than most spoiled young men who had always had anything they wanted. Keith had nothing against Skid personally. However, he thought an ensign ought to be engaged to a first lieutenant, at least.

Since neither Dorothy nor Skid could very well refuse the suggestion Keith had made, the wine was placed before them. Keith raised his glass high in the air.

"To the loveliest girl ever to grace a Navy uniform!" His

dark eyes laughed into Dorothy's. He touched his glass then to Skid's. "And to by far the luckiest man ever to live!"

The two men drank, solemnly. Dorothy didn't. She had no scruples against drinking wine, but she didn't have to drink a toast to herself. Furthermore, she was beginning to have a suspicion that Keith was still laughing at her. He didn't appear to have been put in his proper place at all.

Once more Keith raised his glass. This time he clinked it against the one in front of Dorothy. "And now, suppose we all—you too, Dottie, my dear—drink to the everlasting friendship of us three. For since Dottie and I have been friends for such a long time too—if not from childhood—we should all continue to be the very best of buddies."

As Skid drank to this, grinning agreement, Dorothy had to drink with them.

Somehow it seemed as though the young lieutenant had almost had the last laugh. Especially when he added, "Well, I guess I ought to leave you two love birds together, except that it must almost be time for you to return to the dock, Dottie. And since I'm going out in the gig too, to visit Aunt Nettie again, I can save Skid having to see you safely on board." Turning to the gunner's mate, Keith wound up this clever speech by saying, "I'm sure you won't mind, old man —on the strength of our newly toasted friendship."

This placed the enlisted man in a rather delicate situation. Not that he had to take orders from an officer from another division, but stressing that friendship deal . . .

Skid was not to be taken over, however. He grinned, and untangled his long legs to get up. "Don't know any friend I'd as soon trust my girl with," he said. "When I'm not around, that is. I'll just tag along—if *you* don't mind, old boy."

Dorothy found herself, therefore, flanked on either side by two good-looking young men, one very tall and big and blond, the other dark and debonair and handsome.

Yet she wasn't quite certain about a number of things. Things that would require a great deal of thinking about.

CHAPTER FIVE

Dorothy found herself with more to think about during the next week than she quite knew how to cope with.

She had got herself engaged. Mainly for the purpose of getting rid of another man. But instead of succeeding in that, she seemed only to have complicated matters further.

For before the three of them had parted, the lieutenant once more had managed to get his own way.

Mostly for his benefit, the young ensign had said to Skid, "I suppose I'll see you same time, same place, same day next week?" She had to see Skid in order to explain the things she had said today.

However, in reply to her suggestion, Skid had said that he had a forty-eight-hour pass the next week end. "So I kind of hoped," he had added, his gray-green eyes wearing their most humble and pleading expression, "maybe I could see you then, Dottie."

"Well, I don't know—" she had started to reply.

She had known, of course, that Lieutenant Cameron was an interested listener to all this conversation. Now, he seemed to be waiting for her answer.

"It may be my last shore leave," Skid explained. "From the way the wind is blowing I figure the battle wagon I'm on will be shoving off soon."

"I'll see you sometime during the week end," she promised. "I'm not sure I can get a forty-eight. My cabinmate put in her request for this coming week end some time ago, and one or two of the other nurses have taken their annual leave of absence, so we are rather short on staff."

"I assume you have to clear through the chief nurse?" Keith asked, adding his two-cents' worth.

She had nodded, without thinking what it might lead to. She should have known, she had told herself afterward, that Lieutenant Cameron was up to no good.

Turning to the gunner's mate, the lieutenant said, "Then it's as good as settled, old man! You can count on seeing your girl this week end. I'll put a bug in Aunt Nettie's ear."

Skid started to express his gratitude, but Dorothy interrupted.

"I'd rather not have you ask any favors in my behalf," she stated primly.

"Think nothing of it," Keith returned, his dark eyes laughing into hers. "My intentions, I assure you, are entirely selfish. Since your girl friend Micky already has her leave, and I know I can wrangle one, we can make it a foursome. How about that, Skid, old man?"

Skid said he guessed it would be okay by him. His eyes, meeting Dorothy's, added, *Any arrangement, just so I get to see you, please!* And of course he had had to consider that pledge of friendship between the three of them.

And that was how it had been left.

Dorothy hadn't brought up the subject during the short trip in the launch. In fact, she hadn't talked to the lieutenant at all. She had sat as far away from him as possible, talking with a great show of animation to a pharmacist's mate she often saw during her hours on duty. He was one of those family men who could never talk about anything except his wife and children. Especially when he had a sympathetic listener like Ensign Phillips.

"My wife's bringing the two youngest," he had told Dorothy, "all the way from New Jersey to see me. I've got a feeling in my bones, though," he had looked mournful, "there may be new orders for our hospital ship before they can get here."

Dorothy had tried to tell Chief Whittaker he shouldn't be so pessimistic; she was sure he would get to see his family. She had looked at the latest snapshots of his youngsters and listened attentively, but all the time she had been aware of the lieutenant's presence and his laughing eyes.

She had wished he would fall overboard. Or at least that something would happen to prevent him from carrying out his plans.

She decided she wouldn't do anything about trying to get

a week-end leave. She would just bide her time. She could manage to get enough time off to see Skid.

Micky was full of her own plans for the coming week end. She, like the pharmacist's mate, had heard rumors that they might receive new orders before long. Micky said she was going to shed her uniform and forget she was in the Navy for a while. Since it was permissible to wear civilian clothes off duty, she was going on a shopping spree and buy herself a complete new outfit.

"I wish you were coming ashore, too, Dot," she said. "It's always more fun when there are two gals. Lots more when there are also two men!"

Dorothy had offered no comment, although she knew Micky meant she would like a double date, with that handsome lieutenant as one of the men.

The week end was almost upon them when Ensign Phillips received another summons to the office of Captain Leonard. She had a hunch that this interview might not be altogether in the line of duty, either. It might have something to do with that bug that undoubtedly had been put in Captain Leonard's ear.

She determined to maintain a stiff front, no easy achievement in the awe-inspiring presence of the chief nurse.

This time the captain lost no time in arriving at the point. As soon as the young ensign had saluted and been told to be at ease, she had addressed her in her usual severe manner.

"I believe, Ensign Phillips, you wanted a pass for this week end. I haven't seen your written application and, as you know, we are somewhat short of nursing staff right now."

"That's why I didn't put in an application." Dorothy seized this advantage quickly. "I realize it would be asking a favor. I don't want that."

Captain Leonard gave the younger nurse a long look. Apparently she liked what she saw.

"As it happens," she said, "there will be several dismissals. I believe I can spare you. You need not consider it favoritism."

"That's very kind of you," Dorothy said, not wanting to seem unappreciative. "But after thinking the matter over, I

really would prefer not to take a week-end leave right now. You see, Captain Leonard, my annual leave is coming up, two full weeks. I thought I'd save all the time I could so I can go home and be with my family."

This was indeed an inspiration. If there was any truth to all these new rumors about a change in orders, no telling where Dorothy might be sent. She *would* like to go home. Besides her grandfather, there were her mother and father, several brothers and sisters, and numerous aunts and uncles and cousins—all of whom she would like to see.

"I'm sorry, Ensign Phillips," and there was almost a flicker of understanding in Captain Leonard's tone, "but I cannot grant such a request. Due to reasons which I cannot divulge at the moment, I doubt if any more leaves will be granted after this week end. Therefore, I feel that I must advise you to take this one."

Dorothy felt certain that the only reason that couldn't be divulged was the captain's nephew—for of course he was behind all this. There was no telling what he had said to his aunt.

Dorothy, however, couldn't say what she thought. Nor could she appear ungrateful when the chief nurse believed she was going out of her way to be nice. She made one last effort.

"I really don't mind giving up this particular leave," she said. "Everybody has to make some sacrifices now and then. I certainly wouldn't want to leave you shorthanded, Captain Leonard."

The chief nurse managed a smile, and for just a moment her dark eyes bore a startling resemblance to the laughing ones of her nephew—at least there was a suspicion of amusement in their depths.

"You can let me be the best judge of that," Captain Leonard said. "There's no reason for you to make a sacrifice. Go ahead and have a good time—and incidentally," she added, rising, "you are doing me a favor, Ensign Phillips. You see, I haven't forgotten our conversation in regard to my nephew, and I appreciate your keeping a watchful eye on him."

Dorothy didn't know what to say. She was afraid that whatever she attempted might sound silly. Sometimes, as her

grandfather often remarked, the wisest course was to say nothing.

Later she reminded herself that the only promise she had given Captain Leonard was to try to do her best, and she hadn't meant in regard to Keith Cameron. Now, by remaining tongue-tied, she had practically committed herself to keeping an eye on him.

As for her promise to Tommy Simms—well, he had only asked her not to leave Micky alone with the handsome lieutenant. Since it was to be a foursome, that could be taken care of—except that she, Dorothy, would have to find an opportunity to be alone with Skid.

As she had foreseen, when she told Micky she had a week-end pass too—and that a foursome could be arranged with the two Navy men—her cohummate was as thrilled as could be.

"I take it all back," Micky said. "About your acting as though you weren't my best pal. To think you'd do this for me—a date with that gorgeous lieutenant! If ever there's anything I can do for you, Dot, all you have to do is name it!"

Dorothy felt a bit guilty in not explaining that it had been someone else's idea. Maybe, if she exerted all her charms, Micky might make Keith fall for her. Certainly the redheaded nurse possessed enough charm. And evidently Keith Cameron was easy prey.

There was no reason why such thoughts should cause Dorothy to feel depressed. She told herself it was another case of homesickness. For it would have been wonderful to go home for a visit. Also, there was Tommy. She liked Tommy; she felt genuinely sorry for him. What he ought to do, of course, was to tell Micky herself how he felt toward her. He ought to lay down the law to Micky. However, Dorothy couldn't quite imagine the young intern doing that. He was far too sensitive and shy. But if he couldn't speak for himself, perhaps he deserved to lose her.

Anyway, there was no question that the coming week end promised to be quite a week end.

After the two gals were settled in their hotel, they started

to make ready for The Big Evening, as Micky called it. Micky went on her shopping spree. Dorothy decided to shampoo her hair and do her nails. She sent a message to the little restaurant, addressed either to Lieutenant Cameron or Mr. Hale, telling them where they could meet at six-thirty. That is, her note had added, if the two still wanted to take them out for dinner.

"Wouldn't it be something," Micky groaned, when she returned, laden down with her purchases, "if they stood us up? Though if they do I know some other men who'll be glad to play second fiddle."

Dorothy knew she could count on Skid. And the lieutenant, since this foursome had been his idea, would certainly put in an appearance. The city seemed to be overrun with Navy—a million sailors and officers in their Navy blues; there was a feeling of festivity in the air, a holiday spirit.

"How do I look?" Micky asked when, after more than an hour of primping, she was finally ready. She whirled around for Dorothy's benefit, to show how the full skirt of her new dress of bright green taffeta swirled into a wide circle and showed a tantalizing glimpse of lace-edged petticoats. She wore her red hair piled high on top of her head in soft curls.

"You look simply breath-taking!" Dorothy said truthfully. "I would never recognize you, Ensign Brown," she added smilingly. Yet she felt a bit dismayed. Her simple blue-gray dress, with its squarely cut neckline and short sleeves, was definitely a back number in comparison with the green gown.

"Thanks, chum!" Micky's eyes danced. "You look mighty sweet yourself. And I don't know—sometimes I think quiet colors do have more—well, class."

Dorothy knew that her friend was only trying to be kind. Micky had the Irish heart that went with hot tempers and a quick wit. However, she resolved not to let the fact that Micky outshone her spoil her evening. This might be the last shore leave for a long time to come; it was only sensible to make the most of it.

She didn't know why, but she felt gay and excited before it had begun. She felt as though something wonderful was going to happen.

When the two girls went down to the lobby, only Keith was waiting. You might know, Dorothy thought, it would be the lieutenant.

After they had exchanged greetings, and Keith had gallantly told them how beautiful they both were, Dorothy inquired about Skid.

"Don't fret," he said. "I doubt if a typhoon, or orders from the Admiral himself, could keep your sailor boy from showing up. I left your note for him. But if he doesn't show, I assure you I can take care of both of you gorgeous creatures!"

"I'll bet you could!" Micky said, rolling her eyes at him. "Then I wouldn't be just a substitute."

"You never could be that," Keith returned promptly. But his glance, meeting Dorothy's briefly, seemed to say that she knew better.

They decided to wait for Skid in the cocktail lounge. Dottie would have preferred waiting in the lobby. Suppose Skid came, thought they had gone on somewhere, and left? Think how disappointed he would be. But both the lieutenant and Micky succeeded in laughing such fears aside. Skid would know where to look for his friends. Since he was late, he wouldn't expect them to waste precious time in a crowded lobby. And Keith added that he would have a bellboy page Mr. Charles Hale until he located him.

The cocktail lounge was like a number of others. Its lights were romantically dimmed; there were palms and flowers for tropical atmosphere, even an Hawaiian orchestra.

Micky had drawn her chair as closely as possible to the handsome lieutenant's.

Dorothy wished, for Micky's sake, that she wouldn't overplay her charms. Micky really was an attractive girl. She didn't have to throw herself at a man's head.

Keith apparently didn't object. He continued to be attentive to both of them, remarking that it had been clever of them to make it a gala evening by dressing up. It did a fellow good to see a girl look as she had back home in the days before there was a war on.

"It was Micky's idea," Dorothy said. She was beginning to feel jittery. What could be delaying Skid? How foolish she

would feel if he didn't come, especially when it was Skid she wanted to see this week end.

"I suppose Dorothy has told you," Keith was saying to Micky, "that she's engaged to her sailor boy. We'll have to *really* celebrate that momentous event this time—champagne with our dinner—yes, even if the old boy doesn't make it."

His laughing eyes met Dorothy's. She looked away. That slow anger started gathering within her. She told herself once more she wouldn't let him spoil her evening.

"She has not!" Micky was indignant. "I'm finding out that Dot's as sly as a fox sometimes! And she always looks so sweet and quiet! Especially tonight—doesn't she, Keith?—in that little gray-blue dress, so quaint and sort of old-fashioned."

Dorothy knew that Micky didn't purposely intend to be mean; she just wanted to call the handsome lieutenant's attention to how up-to-date, fashionable, and almost daring her own sleeveless, full-skirted new green dress was.

"Still water always runs deep," Keith said with his slow smile. "I suspect that your friend Dorothy has many hidden qualities which no one, perhaps not even she herself, suspects. Reservoirs of strength and emotion, even of feminine cunning. However," he finished, resuming the chivalrous role he was acting tonight, "in my humble opinion the gown she's wearing is *most* becoming."

Dorothy didn't bother to thank him for the compliment; she was too provoked at the other things he had said. Reservoirs of emotion, indeed! All the rest was more laughter at her expense, she well knew. Not that she cared as much as she had; what concerned her now was that Skid hadn't arrived. She was really worried. Something must have happened to him; she couldn't believe he wouldn't come unless it was physically impossible.

Glancing anxiously, for perhaps the dozenth time, toward the door that led from the main lobby into the cocktail lounge, she thought she saw Skid. Or at least a man's tall, broad figure, the light shining on his sandy crew cut and strong features, that should belong to Skid.

"I believe that's—" she began, then stopped. For as this

man advanced on into the room, she saw that he didn't wear the bell-bottomed trousers and middy blouse of an enlisted man. This Navy man was a CPO—chief petty officer, dressed in the neat double-breasted blue coat with its gleaming brass buttons, its red and silver chevron on one sleeve; in his hand he carried the white-topped hat with its dark visor and silver eagle.

"Blow me down!" Keith failed, for once, to conceal his surprise, blasé as he strove to be. He got to his feet, pushed back his chair, to hold out a congratulatory hand. "If it isn't the old boy . . . I almost started to address you wrong—for I see it's Chief Hale now . . . How about that!"

The two young men shook hands, Keith heartily, Skid a bit awkwardly, yet with an air of unmistakable pride, as his gaze met Dorothy's and his grin broadened.

"Sure am sorry to be late," he said. "Had to wait on this getup. Wanted to wear it especially tonight. A surprise for you, Dottie."

"I *am* surprised—and terribly pleased," Dorothy said, her eyes smiling back into his. Relief, and genuine pleasure, came flooding back to replace anxiety. She was proud of Skid's promotion. He was still a non-commissioned officer, but he had won this achievement the hard way. Her grandfather would have liked that; Grandpa never approved of having laurels handed to you on a silver platter.

After all of them had admired the chevron with its crossed guns and taken note of the red hash marks on his sleeve, Micky exclaimed that she hadn't yet been properly introduced. "To think you've won my very dearest girl friend!" She rolled her eyes, this time, at Skid. "I think it's too exciting! I hope you two will invite us—Keith and me—to the wedding!"

Skid managed to mumble something. His face got almost purple. First, he had found himself suddenly engaged; now, the talk was of marriage.

Dorothy was thinking, Now how can I possibly explain things without hurting his feelings? It looked more and more as though there was nothing she could do except try to make this trumped-up betrothal authentic. She would have to do

something as soon as she could manage to be alone with Skid.

Keith suggested that they move on to a livelier spot. He said he knew a place that was off-limits that really was pretty good. He had borrowed a car for the week end, so they could go anywhere they wanted to.

Naturally Micky said that this suited her and sounded "simply divine." Skid said he was agreeable to anything the others wanted to do. So Dorothy had no excuse not to go along with the evening's fun, though she hoped this place that Keith had in mind was one of which his aunt would approve. Dorothy, keeping that promised watchful eye, was afraid Keith might drink too much before the evening was over.

The car was long and low, and glistened with chrome. It was a dazzling crimson with cream-leather upholstery; its light tan top was down. Micky went into ecstasies over it. She slid into the front seat, and Skid helped Dorothy into the rear.

"Hold on to your hats," the lieutenant advised as the car headed into the heavy traffic on the beautiful Harbor Drive with its palm trees on both sides. "Away we go!"

Neither girl wore a hat. The wind felt fresh and soft against Dorothy's face, but it threatened to destroy Micky's carefully placed curls. For this reason, perhaps, she sat so close to the driver two more persons could have occupied the wide front seat. Her red head nestled against the lieutenant's broad shoulder.

Of course this didn't bother Dorothy, except that she believed when a woman ran after a man he usually ran in the opposite direction. Micky shouldn't be so obvious if she wanted to capture Keith's interest.

Since they were practically alone, this should be the time to offer those explanations to Skid. It would be almost impossible to make oneself heard without shouting above the roar of the motor, the whistling wind and the sound of the surf, now that they were on the highway that followed the ocean.

Skid appeared content with silence. He had reached over

to lay one of his big hands on top of hers, to smile into her eyes. He didn't say anything, yet he seemed to be offering the reassurance that there was no need for her to, either —that everything was all right.

Her heart swelled in gratitude toward him; then it contracted painfully, remembering that he was going to sea, that he might soon be in combat.

She resolved that if Skid wanted things left as they were between them, that's the way it would be. For how could she tell him she had only done what she had because of another man?

"This is it!" Keith announced, stopping before a large, rambling structure ablaze with neon lights, the faint sound of music and laughter and gayety issuing from within, and beyond the fainter singing accompaniment of the sea.

There were a great many cars outside and inside every table appeared occupied, with throngs of people, many of them Navy men with their girls, milling about near the enormous horseshoe bar with its glistening array of bottles, or dancing on the polished center floor.

The two girls went to repair the damages done by the wind while the young men procured a table. Keith had assured them there would be no difficulty; he knew the headwaiter. And as the latter came up, bowing and beaming, the lieutenant slipped him a ten-dollar bill.

"Isn't it marvelous," Micky said, "to be out with a man who knows his way around? Isn't he simply *divine?*"

There was no need for Dorothy to ask which "he" Micky meant.

"Oh, I don't know," she said. She didn't particularly like people who threw their weight around, or who tipped lavishly in order to obtain special privileges. "I prefer Skid's type. Quiet, responsible—a man you know you can always depend on."

"That's because you're in love," Micky stated loftily. She was trying to pin her wayward curls back in place. "I look a fright! But I adore driving with the top down." Then, resuming the more interesting subject, "I'm certainly glad it's not Keith you're in love with! I wouldn't have half a chance. It may not be love—sometimes I wonder if there *is* such a thing

—but I do know I could go for that handsome lieutenant in a *big way!*"

Dorothy couldn't deny being in love. When you were engaged to a man, you were supposed to be in love with him. She doubted very seriously that it was love Micky felt for Keith. Micky fell in and out of her amorous experiences like a baby duck trying to learn to swim. Only a few weeks ago, before Keith had entered her life, Micky had been raving about a man she had met at a party. He wasn't Navy, he was in oil. And rich. Micky had frankly admitted that that was his main asset. She had said it would be no trouble at all for her to fall madly in love with a man who had so much moola.

When the two girls joined Lieutenant Cameron and Skid at a choice table—near the dance floor, yet not on top of the orchestra—the champagne had already been ordered. Keith made quite a ceremony of it, assisted not only by the headwaiter but by two others. As the cork popped, glasses tinkled, and another toast to Dottie and Skid was proposed, people at near-by tables turned to look at the two good-looking young couples who evidently were having a gala celebration.

Dorothy no longer felt gay. She didn't like being the center of so much attention. She also felt like a conspirator. All this fuss about something that was only a figment of her imagination. Worse than that, a silly gesture on her part to make a certain young man stop laughing at her. And worse still, as the evening wore on, one that hadn't worked.

For Keith was in high spirits, his dark eyes laughing all the time. He continued to drink more than he should, or at least more than Dorothy felt his aunt would want him to, but he also continued to be gallant and amusing.

Micky was in seventh heaven. She had never had such a marvelous evening. Keith was a divine dancing partner, he knew all the "ropes," and he was by far the best-looking man, in his officer's white Air Corps uniform, in the entire place.

Skid was enjoying himself in his quiet way. He didn't have much to say, but his eyes said many things whenever they met Dorothy's. He wasn't an expert dancer, but he managed a few of the less complicated steps well enough.

Of course that wasn't the reason Dorthy accepted when

Keith suggested later on that they try changing partners for one dance. She accepted merely to show the lieutenant that he hadn't spoiled her evening, and to prove that it made no difference to her whether she danced with him or not.

She was to find out that perhaps that one dance had made all the difference in the world—Dorothy's personal one, anyway. But she wasn't to realize this until, as her grandpa would have said, a lot of water—including a typhoon—had gone under the bridge. And it might not have been this one dance alone that was to become the contributing factor—for how could one dance be that important? Yet, much later, looking back on the week end and all that had happened, it was the dance that stood out clearest in her memory.

CHAPTER SIX

Afterward it seemed impossible that so much could have been crowded into one week end. The two young couples visited Balboa Park, the Art Gallery, the open-air Bowl with its revolving stages, the famous zoo, where Dorothy fell in love with a cunning Koala bear cub; at La Jolla they all went in bathing; at Mission Beach, they went deep-sea fishing for barracuda, albacore, and other huge fighting fish. Micky caught the day's best prize in a marlin that weighed almost two hundred pounds; she was so thrilled and excited she almost fell out of the boat. They watched a regatta in Mission Bay; they played shuffleboard and badminton, at which Skid excelled. They had their pictures taken and their fortunes told. They covered several hundred miles along the ocean highway and even crossed the border into Mexico to see the old-world charm of Tijuana. Dorothy privately thought the open-air shops selling basketwork, silver jewelry, pottery and perfumes took advantage of the tourists. Yet it was interesting and one felt transported into a foreign world.

And it was in Tijuana that Skid bought Dorothy a silver chain with a small cameo pendant.

"I wish it were a ring," he said to her in a lowered tone. Micky, with Keith in tow, was at the far end of the long counter trying to make up her mind about a bracelet. "I wish it were really so—that you were wearing a ring I had given you," Skid added, his gray-green eyes looking earnestly into Dorothy's

This was her chance.

"I like this as well as a ring," she assured him. "Whenever I wear it, I'll remember our happy times together. I've been wanting to talk to you, Skid—to explain. But—well, frankly, I don't know how. But if you want it to be real—a sort of engagement between us—it's all right with me."

"If I want it . . . " he said. "You must know, Dottie, how I feel toward you. How I've felt from the first minute we met. But I never even hoped you'd feel the same way toward me."

She had to be honest. For hadn't Skid told her that he believed her to be honest and fair? So Dorothy said, "It's too soon to know how I feel, Skid. I do like you—very, very much. In time, it might grow into something bigger. I can say things to you that I could never say to anyone else, and I know I can depend upon you and trust you—always."

Perhaps that wasn't exactly love, but it appeared to be close enough to satisfy Skid.

"Thanks," he said, his voice husky. "I'll do my darnedest to live up to all that, Dottie—I promise you."

Dorothy noticed that Micky had finally made her selection. In another moment or so she and Lieutenant Cameron would join them. She said, "I know you'll keep your promise, Skid. And I'll try to keep mine—when you come back. That will give us time enough to make certain. Is that all right with you?"

His eyes told her it would be.

However, when the other two young people came up, after Micky had displayed the wide silver bracelet set with green stones, Skid said, somewhat shyly, yet proudly too, "I bought Dottie a necklace. Mainly because the profile of the lady on the cameo looks like her— And because, as I just told her, I couldn't buy her the ring I'd like to now."

So it had been Skid who had put the touch of finality to

their engagement. It had taken even Dorothy a bit by surprise. She had felt Keith's dark eyes, not laughing now, looking at her. Her own gaze had met his for a brief moment. Then she had looked away.

For, to her amazement, there had been a wounded look in their depths. The sort of hurt bewilderment she might have expected to see in Skid's if she had hurt him.

Micky had remarked that the cameo lady did resemble Dorothy. But her manner showed that Micky didn't consider an inexpensive necklace much of an engagement present. When Micky became engaged, she would expect a diamond, of as many karats as the man could possibly afford.

"Keith wanted to pay for *my* bracelet," Micky said, rolling her eyes expressively. "But I told him even if I am shanty-Irish, I pay for whatever I buy—until my husband takes over that job!"

In spite of all Micky's efforts, Dorothy realized that she hadn't succeeded in winning Keith. Dorothy's first dance with Keith had proved conclusively that the handsome young lieutenant was not in love with the attractive redheaded Navy nurse.

For it had been during this dance that Keith had told Dorothy he was in love with her. At the time she hadn't believed him. It was just the line he handed to any new girl. She had thought he was only trying to annoy her, to rekindle that always-smoldering anger.

Though to be quite truthful, at the time there had been other emotions aroused in her besides anger. For Keith not only had danced with her—he had kissed her. And as Micky had remarked, when the handsome lieutenant kissed a girl it was something she didn't forget.

He had danced "divinely," as Micky would have said; it had been like floating in the clouds to be held in his arms, like being a part of the music. Quite different from dancing with Skid. Or, for that matter, with anyone else. For a while Dorothy had almost forgotten who her partner was, giving herself up to the joy of movement.

She hadn't realized that Keith had guided her away from the dance floor, across a short passage, out into the night. A night that was still and soft and sweet.

"Why did you come out here?" she had asked. It had been like a rude awakening from a lovely dream. "You know we shouldn't." She had meant that they shouldn't have left the lights and gayety, Skid and Micky; not that it was dangerous for them to be alone on an isolated island in the lovely night.

She hadn't used the word dangerous, even to herself. But it had been there in the rapid beating of her heart.

"You know why," Keith had retorted. Then without another word, he had swept her into his arms. She would have uttered a little cry of protest, but his mouth had crushed against her own, stifling it. She would have fought him off, but he held her much too closely. And then she had felt her anger melting away. She had felt weak; her head light and giddy.

"You—you shouldn't have—" she had managed in a tight voice. His arms still would have held her, but she slipped out of their embrace.

"Why not?" Even in the dark his eyes seemed to be laughing; there was laughter in his voice, too.

She wouldn't let him laugh at her. She wouldn't let him think it mattered that much. But she had discovered that she was trembling.

"You know why," she had managed.

"If you mean because of this phony engagement you've cooked up with your sailor boy—pardon me, I mean your chief—" he had begun.

Her interruption had been quick and cutting. "How dare you say that! There's nothing phony about Skid. He's worth a dozen of you, Keith Cameron."

"We won't argue that point," he said. "The point at issue is that you know you aren't in love with the guy."

"How do you know?" Wondering how indeed he did.

"Because I'm in love with you," he answered with his usual arrogant assurance.

"You don't know what love is." Perhaps she didn't know, for certain, either. She was sure enough that it couldn't have happened to anyone—Skid or herself or Keith—with such lightning quickness. Love was something that had to be tended and cared for, until it grew into a strong bond.

"I've had enough experience," he was brazen enough to

boast. "I ought to know. You've a lot to learn, Dorothy. But you will."

She had thought that even his calling her Dorothy was done to infuriate her. But by now she had regained control of herself. She said in her coolest manner, "I shan't learn anything, ever, from you."

And before he could answer, her head held high, she left him to return to the noisy, crowded room.

Later she had wondered if Skid, or Micky, had noticed her brief absence. And that she had returned alone. For it had been some time before Keith had joined them He had made some remark about meeting some of his buddies, among them his friend Hank. Then Keith had suggested that they go somewhere else, as this place was becoming dull, or else call it a night.

Dorothy had secretly thought that Keith had had more to drink than he should. His face was flushed and his eyes were too bright. She knew that the episode between herself and the lieutenant wouldn't have caused him to want to end the evening, or to feel any embarrassment or regret.

He was too callous for that. She told herself, too, that Keith was contemptible because he had pledged a three-way friendship which included Skid. Wasn't the frienship between two men—in this case Navy brothers—supposed to be truer than that between women?

Kissing the girl who was supposed to be engaged to his friend proved conclusively that Keith didn't have the right principles.

Oh, it was easy to argue all these matters, arrive at such definite conclusions. But it wasn't easy to forget that dance—or that kiss.

After that first evening, Dorothy had made very sure that she was never left alone with Lieutenant Keith Cameron. She wasn't going to risk such an experience again.

As for Keith, he acted as though nothing had taken place. Or as though he had forgotten completely that he had lured her out into the dark, to hold her so fiercely yet tenderly in his arms, to kiss her as though he really loved her.

She found herself wondering if he also had kissed Micky during this week end. If he had, Micky made no mention of

it. She concentrated on having a gay time, making the most of every minute.

"This will be something to remember," she said, with a long, blissful sigh, the last evening when the two girls were getting ready for bed. "Something to tell our grandchildren about. It has been one gay, mad whirl, hasn't it? Terrifically exciting—and such fun. If it never happens again—if none of us ever sees one another, and that's quite possible with a war on—well, it will have been worth it."

Dorothy didn't like to hear such things; they saddened her. She knew that nothing could ever be done over again exactly as it had been; no moment ever re-lived.

And tomorrow they would be saying goodbye to both young men—for how long no one knew. Goodbyes were always sad. Yet that seemed no good reason for Dorothy wishing she could have a good cry into her pillow. She was tired. A bit homesick again. But of course this feeling had nothing to do with being in love.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Goodbyes were said to Skid first, as he had to report to duty several hours before the others. He had told Dorothy that he had tried to see if he could pick her out on deck with his binoculars, insisting that there had been one time when he had thought it was Dorothy he had watched from his tower.

"The girl walked the way you do," Skid said earnestly. "Chin up, shoulders back, same swinging step. I could have sworn it was you, Dot. I kept wishing you'd turn and face in my direction and—well, maybe wave, or something."

His accompanying grin showed he realized this had been wishful thinking. But he was so much in earnest that Dorothy said if she had known he might be looking at her, she certainly would have waved.

Since Skid had named the time when this episode had taken place as during her hours on duty, she doubted very

much that the figure he had followed through the powerful lenses could have been hers.

Unfortunately Keith had listened in on this conversation, although he and Micky were supposed to be involved in a controversy over some trivial matter. The lieutenant had remarkable ears, Dorothy thought ironically.

"I'll lend you my handkerchief," Keith said, "so you'll have something to wave. Next time you walk around the deck you can stop and wigwag one last fond farewell to your Chief. You cannot refuse my little contribution—" He whipped a man-sized pocket handkerchief out of his pocket, bowed with mock gravity, and offered it to Dorothy.

She didn't want to take it, but rather than make a scene, or let him or the others know she didn't want to accept anything from Keith, she did.

She noticed that the linen handkerchief was elaborately monogrammed. It was large enough to serve as a signal. She would wave it, just to spite the lieutenant, and hope that Skid might see it.

"Will you write?" Skid asked. "I'm not much when it comes to letter-writing, but I'll write to *you*, Dottie."

"I'll answer every letter."

"I just adore to get mail," Micky spoke up. "It would be extra exciting out at sea. How do they manage to deliver it?"

Keith explained that there were various means. The ship one was on could pick up mail when it went into port; mail could be landed on a carrier, distributed by a smaller boat; it could be brought out to sea by the fuel or supply ship joining the fleet. "Or," he added, "among ships on the same maneuver, letters can be delivered from one ship to another within running distance by Guard Mail, small boats designated for that purpose."

"The Navy certainly is efficient!" Micky said. "They think of everything."

"Oh, yes," Keith returned mockingly, his eyes meeting Dorothy's briefly, "even sweethearts, as well as official business. The world has to go on, you know, war or no war."

His remark reminded Dorothy that this was no ordinary parting—she might never see Skid again. Or at best it might be months.

Micky could have been thinking the same thing. She said, "For Pete's sake, Dot, aren't you going to kiss your fiancé goodbye? We'll turn our backs, won't we, Keith?"

"Happy to oblige." Keith's tone was one of amused condescension. His following words were intended for Dorothy alone. "Though I'm sure Dorothy must be such an expert when it comes to kissing that it would be a pleasure to watch."

"I doubt if anyone could possibly teach a man of your comprehensive knowledge anything about anything—especially love," Dorothy said. She tried to keep the anger out of her voice, but she knew it was there. She added, for Keith's benefit mostly, although she was perfectly willing to kiss Skid goodbye, "It won't be necessary for you to turn your backs. I'm not ashamed to kiss Skid with the whole world looking on."

With which, she deliberately put both arms around Skid's neck, pulled his head down, and placed her lips against his.

Skid was probably so taken by surprise, and so embarrassed by this love-making in public, that he couldn't quite do justice to his part. Dorothy was much more demonstrative and ardent. If she realized that Skid did not respond with as much feeling as he might have, she knew it must be because he hadn't been prepared.

Nevertheless, no young woman could possibly have failed to compare this kiss with that other one. There was as much difference in the two kisses as in the skill and technique of the professional dancer and the amateur.

"Well, now," the young lieutenant said when Dorothy had finally unclasped her arms and allowed a scarlet-faced young man to straighten the kink out of his back, "I surely did learn something! All I wanted to learn, as a matter of fact."

His dark eyes seemed to say that Dorothy knew quite well what he meant. That had been no lover's kiss. It had been one of sheer bravado.

"I think it was sweet," Micky claimed. Then, rolling her eyes and cocking her head in Keith's direction, "I hope you'll do as well, Lieutenant Cameron, when it comes our turn to say goodbye."

"Oh, I'm not much for kissing," Keith replied airily. "A

certain spirit has to move me. I have to be able to put my all into it, if you get what I mean. Why waste the effort, when the result might be negative? I kissed you once, Micky, but you knew I was thinking of someone else."

"You needn't rub it in!" The redhead pretended to pout. But she hadn't taken offense. It was impossible to be offended when the man you were with was as handsome as the lieutenant was.

Dorothy wanted to say Poof! For Keith to try to pretend that a kiss was something almost sacred with him! He ought to be ashamed; to be made to feel the heel he was. Nor was she taken in by his saying that when he had kissed Micky that night on deck he had been thinking of someone else.

His All, indeed!

In spite of this conclusion on Dorothy's part, when it came time for the lieutenant to say goodbye, Keith didn't kiss Micky, even though she tried to coax him into doing so.

He shook her hand, instead, and thanked her for being such a good sport, making the week end so enjoyable. He said she was quite a gal, and hoped someday to see her again. He also hoped, he added, that she would meet some nice guy, and marry him when this war was over, and raise at least a dozen redheaded kids.

"I must say," Micky returned, "that's the nicest brush-off I've ever received. And the kindest. Frankly, I never have relished being a substitute. Must be the Irish in me. I have to play first fiddle or none. However, I doubt if I ever meet up with a man who can make me want to settle down to baby-sitting for that many kids! And I'll let you in on a little secret, Lieutenant—my crowning glory isn't really this red; it's kind of a mousy-brown."

Keith laughed. He said he liked her hair, anyway. "You're a swell girl," he said warmly again. Then more seriously, "I'm glad, too, you're going to be around to keep an eye on Dorothy. For Dorothy, as you and I well know, is actually a very inexperienced, and naïve, young person. So stick around and don't let her heart run away with her."

"I won't," Micky promised.

All these promises—Dorothy was getting thoroughly fed

up with them. "I believe I can take care of myself," she said coolly. "Most nurses can. I am out of kindergarten."

"Agreed," Keith said, his dark eyes laughing once more. "But you do have the wildest impulses. And once committed, you seem to have some kind of old-fashioned idea that you've got to live up to it, at no matter what cost."

"I think we could all do with a few more old-fashioned principles," Dorothy said, a bit less icily. She hoped the look she gave him told him she meant her remark to be personal.

But if he took it that way, he gave no evidence. He laughed again. He said, "If we aren't careful, this will sound as though we were involved in a lovers' quarrel, my sweet! You know you only quarrel with those you love."

"That's right," Micky chimed in. "True love never runs on greased wheels. And most of those songs tell of love and hate being the same. How he, or she, always 'done me wrong,' yet still is my woman or my man."

"I don't believe in that sort of thing." It wasn't easy to speak coldly when you were so hot and bothered inside, Dorothy found. Where was that calm indifference she kept striving to attain? Darn Keith Cameron, anyway. She hoped she would never see him again. That ought to be proof that she didn't give a fig for him, as Grandpa would have said.

Her grandfather might have wondered, then, why his granddaughter had the blues so badly she really had a good cry after the two nurses were back on duty on the hospital ship.

Dorothy told herself severely it was only that awful letdown one sometimes falls victim to after a holiday—knowing that you might never again see any of the persons you had been with. For although she never wanted to see Keith Cameron again, she couldn't be so mean as to want anything terrible to happen to him. Like cracking up in his plane, being lost at sea, or shot down by an enemy jet— Oh, any number of terrible things. And there was Keith's aunt. Her nephew was her whole world. Or at least he was all the close, personal world she had aside from her nursing career.

The chief nurse might be a dragon, as most of the younger nurses and interns claimed—she ruled over her small kingdom

with a fierce eye and stern will—but she was a woman anyone had to respect and admire. She had enough principles of the old-fashioned variety for herself as well as those who worked under her—and a dozen wayward nephews.

This was why Dorothy was to feel so bad when she found that something must have happened during the week end to change Captain Leonard's attitude toward Ensign Phillips.

There could be no possible doubt that there was a change. True, the chief nurse had never drooled over Dorothy, or anyone, but she *had* gone out of her way to favor the young nurse with a week-end leave.

Her greeting to Ensign Phillips was so frosty one could practically hear the icicles break. She didn't ask whether the aforementioned leave had been a pleasant one, nor did she inquire about her adored nephew. In fact, Captain Leonard looked right through Ensign Phillips, as she gave her her new orders.

The orders came as a blow. Dorothy was to be assigned to night duty. She had never liked night duty too well even during training or on shore. The hours always seemed longer, the night lonely and spooky. Here on the hospital ship, with its sides being slapped with lapping water, with the ghostly gray bulks of other larger ships somehow menacing in the blackness, with now and then the mournful wail of a foghorn and the signal light blinking its message from one ship to another, the nights were longer and lonelier—and eerier—than ever.

Dorothy knew, because she had already served her duty at night. Which was another reason these orders came as a shock. Had Captain Leonard forgotten, or overlooked, the fact that Ensign Phillips had put in that shift? Since the chief nurse had never been known to overlook or forget anything of even minor importance, this hardly seemed possible. It was almost as though Captain Leonard wanted to mete out some deserved punishment to the young ensign.

Dorothy couldn't express what she was thinking, or make any protest. She had to obey like a good officer. But she didn't feel very happy about it.

Also, since she would have to sleep during the day, she wouldn't be able to wave at Skid when the big battleship on

which he was stationed put out to sea. She didn't believe that Skid would have been able to see the handkerchief, anyway, but she had planned to write him that she had waved it and wished him luck.

She might as well send the handkerchief back to the lieutenant—with a short note thanking him but saying she had no use for it and didn't care to keep it.

Considering how she felt, it was strange, therefore, that instead of doing this, Dorothy put the handkerchief carefully away beneath a pile of personal belongings, as though it were a keepsake to be treasured.

This could have been because she couldn't make up her mind what to say in the note to Keith. And if she did write to him, it might look as though she were trying to continue the feud between them. She could just picture him laughing over her note. He was so conceited he would believe she had written because she hoped he might answer.

The following day, everyone on board the hospital ship received orders not to send out any letters.

Dorothy didn't understand what this meant until one of the older nurses who had served in the Navy for several years explained.

"This is it!" she told the others. "We must be going to accompany the fleet on the next maneuvers. Those rumors are true. We'll be heading out—no one knows where—everything must be very hush-hush. Which is why no mail can be sent out until the fleet is well out of the home port."

Naturally everyone was excited. Especially those, like Micky and Dorothy, who never had been at sea. Micky was almost beside herself. She asked Dorothy if she realized that this meant the hospital ship was going to be part of the fleet to which both Keith and Skid were assigned.

Dorothy was amazed. Not once had she thought that this might be possible. She wished she could have told Skid. It would have made him happy to know that the girl he loved was not so far away, after all. It made her feel better, knowing she would be near him. Of course the hospital ship always stayed in the rear of the big battleships, carriers, cruisers, destroyers, repair and fuel ships. It stayed out of line of Fleet Operations, but within calling distance. And the hos-

pital ship would be the only one to run with full lights, the others having to extinguish theirs for total black-out.

"I hope we get to see some real action!" Micky said. "And then I hope it'll be our lucky break to make port in the Hawaiian Islands."

Dorothy thought that was unlikely. And she marveled at her cabinmate's capacity for jumping from one extreme to the other —first wishing to be within sight and hearing of actual fighting, then thinking about the peaceful beauty of the tropics.

"Sounds like wishful thinking to me," she said. What would her one wish be? Skid's safety, of course, and—well, yes, Keith's. The prospect of joining the fleet made Dorothy feel sober and rather sad, instead of being elated as Micky was.

"Not at all," Micky claimed of her wish. "After we pick up casualties, we'll have to head for the nearest port. And we have to refuel as well as unload patients. One of the reasons I joined the Navy was to visit Hawaii. Imagine lying on that wonderful beach, listening to native music, watching the girls do their hula dances and the men in their outrigger canoes! Imagine wearing a gorgeous lei! Think how perfectly romantic the whole thing would be!"

Romance . . . you might know Micky would think of romance. Well, maybe that was the Irish in her again.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Dorothy was awakened abruptly from a sound sleep to the realization that something was wrong. Had it been a sudden jar that had almost thrown her out of the narrow bunk? Or had it been a piercing sound, such as a steam whistle's startling blast?

All she could hear now was Micky's regular breathing. Micky often boasted that she could sleep like a baby through anything.

Dorothy sat up, put a tentative foot over the side, searching for her slippers. As she started to stand up, the cabin seemed to give a lurch, sway back and forth like a rocking chair, then settle to a somewhat slower motion. That was it —the ship was moving! It appeared to be vibrating methodically—a vibration Dorothy could feel in the very pit of her own stomach.

She tried to peer out of the small porthole, but she couldn't see anything or get any impression of passing objects usually connected with motion. It wasn't yet daylight, and it sounded as though it might be raining. Or could it be the howling of the wind, or even the distant rumbling of the engines buried in the bowels of the big ship?

She hated to wake up Micky. But this was too thrilling a moment for her cabinmate to miss. It was historic, really—for them, anyway.

This time she kept her balance as she clung to the side of the bunk. Heavens! If it were going to be like this, Skid had been mistaken in saying she would soon get her "sea legs" once she was out at sea. If this was the first sample, she could easily imagine herself becoming a patient instead of the nurse.

"What's the matter?" Micky asked in a sleepy voice, after persistent shaking had finally caused her to stir and give some sign of life. She flopped over on her other side, facing the bulkhead. "'S not time to rise and shine . . . Couldn't be—just got into bed . . . "

"But we're moving, Micky! The ship is leaving the harbor. I didn't think you'd want to miss it."

Dorothy had turned on a low light. She was endeavoring to see something besides dark water out of the porthole. An object that appeared to be a tugboat was alongside the ship now. She supposed they were still in the channel, which might explain why it was so choppy. Although now that she had accustomed herself to the vibration, she didn't feel so wobbly.

"Moving—" Micky repeated in the same drowsy tone, and she flopped over once more. "How can you tell?" She started to raise her head from her crumpled pillow, then let it plunk back with a little yell. "Hector's pup! I'll say we are . . . Is the cabin trying to stand on end or what?"

"It isn't bad, really," her cabinmate reassured her, "once

you get used to it. I had the same feeling at first. It's inside you—a vibration, as though you kept time with the ship. But once you get a firm stand, your balance is okay. I thought maybe we could get dressed and go up on deck—what do you think?"

"I'd much rather sleep," Micky said. But she tried raising her head once more. She leaned on an experimental elbow. A grin began to spread across her face. With her body, she exaggerated the chug-chug, chug-chug of the rhythmic motion. "Golly Moses!" she exclaimed. "It's like riding in one of those ancient Fords, or even bareback riding."

"Shall we get dressed?"

"Sure thing. I wouldn't miss this for a million!" Micky swung her legs over the side of the upper bunk. She was very wide-awake.

It was always a mathematical problem to find one's way up on deck. The corridors were so sharply angled and narrow, and terminated so abruptly. When the two girls reached the upper deck the sun was just coming up. It was only a rose-lavender haze through the overcast of gray clouds. Yet it was a beautiful sight. Some of the other staff members had gathered under a small awning that gave protection from the fog-laden air to watch the activities of the ship's crew. Few of them would have understood the instructions that bellowed out of the loudspeaker from the bridge. "Fantail reports channel buoy a hundred yards dead astern!" Or "Two tin-cans coming past gate making ten knots!" Sailors were hauling heavy ropes and bobbing around like marionettes. Some of the other larger ships were too close for comfort, yet when they slid past the distance between them was surprisingly clear.

"We seem to be backing out," Micky observed. And someone remarked that that was exactly what they were doing.

Then the ship cleared the channel entrance, circled in a large arc, and headed straight, just as the sun broke through the clouds with an almost dazzling brilliance.

A big sigh escaped those assembled together. They looked at one another with expressions bordering on triumph as though each had accomplished some personal victory. Then they scattered to their various stations.

"Me, I could do with a man-sized breakfast!" Micky claimed, linking an arm through Dorothy's.

"Wasn't it wonderful?" Dorothy was still bemused, lost in the experience she had just undergone. The big ship seemed to have quieted down, as though it, too, had settled itself for a serene voyage.

Dorothy found herself thinking that maybe, after all, Skid had been right. Once out at sea, she wouldn't feel so squeamish. And thinking of Skid, she wished she had remembered to wave the handkerchief. He might have been watching for her through his binoculars in his high tower. Although that was hardly likely; common sense told her he would be more actively occupied. Besides, the handkerchief was still hidden away among her personal things. Keith's handkerchief of fine linen with its embroidered monogram . . . Had Keith, too, been close by on some other big carrier with its planes? Would he have slept on, indifferent to the drama of leaving the home port, starting on another adventure, one that might hold horror and death. . . .

But she wasn't going to think about Keith Cameron. He was a thoroughly unstable, unprincipled young man. He had laughed at her, making fun of her by pretending he had fallen in love with her at first sight. Somehow, that gay week end seemed unreal, like a dream, something that could never have happened.

The present became very real. Inside the mess hall, one suddenly realized once more that the tables and chairs, even the ceiling and walls—or bulkheads and overheads, as they should be called—appeared to be heaving up and down. The dishes rattled, cups sliding on their saucers, and when lifted toward one's mouth the cup would do its best to seek gravity, so that it was an effort to hold it.

However, it was Micky who got sick! Not Dorothy.

Perhaps Micky attacked her man-sized breakfast of ham and eggs too heartily. Anyway, Dorothy noticed all of a sudden that her cabinmate had stopped eating. She saw that the other girl's face had turned a weird shade of greenish-gray. Micky jumped up so quickly that her chair toppled over backward, and she lurched out of the room.

At first, Dorothy thought that Tommy Simms was going after her. He had pushed back his chair at the other table, started to rise, then had sunk back, determinedly giving his whole attention to his own breakfast once more.

So it was up to Dorothy.

She couldn't imagine what had come over Tommy. He had always been eager to lend a helping hand to anyone in distress, friend or foe. Lately, since that week end, as a matter of record, he had treated Dorothy almost as frigidly as the chief nurse had. When they encountered each other, Tommy hurried past, barely mumbling a greeting, his eyes avoiding hers, or he pretended he hadn't seen her at all.

When she followed her cabinmate to their quarters, Micky was lying on the lower bunk, her face still that sickish color, emitting low groans and grunts. Finally she gasped, "Get me a doctor, I'm dying for sure! Get Dr. Simms!"

Dorothy hesitated. She didn't believe Micky was dying, even if seasickness could make one wish to do so. She wondered if Dr. Simms would come. But of course he would, she told herself, bending down to give Micky a comforting pat and to advise her to lie quietly, that she would fetch Tommy Simms at once.

She found Tommy just leaving the mess hall. He would have brushed past, but Dorothy placed a detaining hand on his arm.

"You'll have to come see Micky," she said. "She thinks she's dying. She really is miserable."

"I'm supposed to report to surgery," Tommy said, his eyes gazing over Dorothy's head. "Two of the galley boys got in a fight, and one's pretty badly slashed up."

"Could you spare just a minute on the way?" Dorothy asked. "If you'll take a look at Micky and tell me what to do for her, I can carry on from there."

The young intern hesitated, scowled, gave her a quick glance.

"I'll stop by," he said, none too graciously. "But I must report to surgery first. I doubt if Ensign Brown will pass on before I get to her."

Dorothy had to be satisfied with that. She supposed that Dr. Tommy Simms was right; his first duty was to report to

surgery—he would probably have to take quite a number of stitches in that Filipino mess boy. Those boys wielded a wicked knife when they got angry. They did everything in a big way; when they got drunk on shore leave, they whooped it up so much that they had to be in sick bay for days.

When she told Micky that Tommy would come as soon as he could, but hadn't been able to come with her, Micky said, "He's being mean on purpose. Bet he wishes I would die. He's sore as the dickens. Says he knows everything we did over the week end."

So that was it . . . "How could he?" she asked.

"Says he got hold of a jeep and followed us."

"That wasn't very nice."

"It certainly wasn't," Micky agreed. "Spying on me. Playing the private dick. I told him what I thought of him."

"Yet now that you're ill you want to see him," Dorothy reminded her, smiling at the picture Micky had presented of herself giving vent to that Irish temper. Poor Tommy. No wonder he was upset. And he would also be provoked with Dorothy because he would believe she had broken her word to him.

This still didn't explain why Captain Leonard was treating Dorothy so shabbily.

However, Dorothy was to receive an explanation for the chief nurse's attitude toward her from Tommy Simms.

After he had taken a look at Micky—a most professional one—and prescribed for her—Tommy gave a nod that indicated he wished to speak with Ensign Phillips in private. Dorothy followed him into the passageway, shutting the door to the cabin behind her.

Maybe Micky was sicker than she realized; maybe Dr. Simms wanted to impart this bad news out of hearing of the patient. Micky might have picked up a virus on shore. It could even be an acute attack of appendicitis.

It was nothing of the sort. Dr. Simms said, "She'll be all right in another twenty-four hours. Nothing wrong except she's frightened and therefore seasick."

"I don't believe it!" Dorothy returned, without thinking how that sounded from a nurse to a doctor. Seeing the expression that came over Tommy's face, she tacked on

hastily, "I mean I can't imagine Micky being afraid of anything."

"Neither can I," the young doctor replied dryly. "However, fear is at the bottom of this malady. Subconscious fear, of course."

Maybe it was her fault, Dorothy decided. She shouldn't have awakened Micky out of such a sound sleep.

But it still seemed strange it should have been Micky, rather than herself. Dorothy was willing to admit, with her conscious mind, that she was afraid, not only of the sea, but of all the elements of nature over which man had so little control, the horror of war.

She waited, thinking that Dr. Simms had something more to say in regard to Micky. Instead, he surprised Dorothy by saying abruptly, "I understand congratulations are in order, Ensign Phillips."

"Congratulations?" This was such a sharp twist that Dorothy couldn't immediately follow his train of thought. Then she realized there could only be one answer. Tommy had learned about her engagement to Skid. Micky must have told him during that lacing she had given him. "Oh," she said meekly, "thank you."

"It's true then?" The scowl between his brows was etched deeper. "You are going to marry that enlisted man."

"I am engaged to *Chief* Hale."

"I'm sorry to hear it," the young intern surprised her by saying with the same bluntness.

"I don't understand why you should be."

"You don't? When you gave me the impression, and your word of honor as well, that you would do everything possible to keep that lieutenant away from Micky—"

"What did you want me to do—marry him?" By this time Dorothy was really angry.

It didn't faze Tommy Simms. "Why not? Since you are a Navy officer, it seems to me you should marry someone of the same, or even a higher, rank. I might add," Tommy stated boldly, "I am not alone in such an opinion. Captain Leonard also feels about it as I do."

"Captain Leonard—what has she got to do with it?"

"Quite a lot. As chief nurse, it is her duty to look after

the younger nurses. Aside from that, Captain Leonard is a woman of extreme good sense and integrity."

Dorothy didn't question these qualities in the chief nurse. However, she was so furious she felt hot and cold by turns. This explained a lot of things—her assignment to night duty, the way Captain Leonard had looked through her as though she were a piece of thin cellophane.

"It seems to me," Dorothy said coldly, "my personal life belongs to me—not the Navy or anyone connected with it. Certainly I intend to be engaged to whomever I wish. When the time comes, I shall marry the man I decide upon—not someone you and Captain Leonard choose for me."

"That may be. However," the young intern said, "it may interest you to know that a staff meeting was called in regard to this personal issue. Everyone present agreed that it was a mistake for an ensign in the Navy to become engaged to, or even go with, an enlisted man."

"Well—well, I must say I appreciate all this interest, and gossiping and meddling!" Dorothy drew herself up to her full five feet-four. "And I would also appreciate your informing the entire staff, including Captain Leonard, that I not only will be engaged to anyone I want, but that I will marry the man of my choice whether he is a noncommissioned officer in the United States Navy or not."

With which final pronouncement, Ensign Philhps turned on her heel, marched off, and slammed the door to the cabin.

She didn't care that such conduct wasn't according to medical ethics. In fact, she told herself, she didn't care if she got court-martialed and dishonorably discharged from the Navy.

She supposed that, aside from disapproval over an officer being engaged to an enlisted man, Captain Leonard felt, as Tommy did, that Dorothy had broken her promise. Well, she most certainly hadn't promised to marry the chief nurse's nephew in order to be his guardian. No doubt Keith had told his aunt he was in love with Dorothy, not because he actually was, but because he was so sure of his success with every woman, he wanted to prove he could win out over an enlisted man.

By such reasoning, she was able to put the blame on the

handsome lieutenant, thus gaining some satisfaction. A man would have called it pure feminine reasoning, not logic.

Whatever it was, Dorothy was now much more seriously involved than she had bargained for. For now the entire staff knew about this peculiar engagement of hers. Everyone considered her a very foolish young woman. She had lost Tommy Simms' friendship. She had lost the approval of Captain Leonard just when she had begun to feel that the chief nurse liked her. She was in Dutch all around.

There was only one thing she was certain about—she was through making promises. She would never make one again to anybody—not even to herself.

Perversely, she didn't realize that in thinking thus she was making, and breaking, another promise.

CHAPTER NINE

They had been at sea for several days—days during which Ensign Phillips spent most of her time sleeping, or resting, and trying to get used to seeing nothing but water and sky. The rest of the fleet had gone on ahead so that the big ships were only small dark objects on the distant horizon. And at night they could not be seen at all.

Nights were much longer and lonelier than any Dorothy had known. Before leaving port the beds had been emptied of patients. Only a few had occupants now. One was occupied by the Filipino boy who had developed a bad infection from his knife wounds. One of the crew had come down with pneumonia, but thanks to penicillin he was not really very ill. And there was one nurse who had hysteria.

So there wasn't too much for Dorothy to do during her hours on duty. She was the only nurse on duty during the night. The only other person on this shift was the pharmacist's mate, Chief Whittaker.

He was anything but good company. He was as glum, as soured on the world, as a man could possibly get. For he had

missed seeing his wife and his two youngest children. His wife had reached San Diego just after they had sailed.

"After her making that long expensive trip, and all the arrangements at home for the care of the other children and the house, then to arrive too late to get to say goodbye. I always get those kind of breaks, though," he would add morosely.

Dorothy felt sorry for him. She felt so sorry for him that she spent what time she could listening to his laments. Until she received word from the chief nurse that this had been reported to her attention and that she felt Ensign Phillips could find more useful ways in which to pass the time.

The note, which Dorothy found in her cabin, one morning when she came off night duty, went on to suggest that the medicine chests could be checked and put in order, the linen could be sorted and counted, and that the keys to the medicine closets, including the one for the narcotics supply, would be left in the top drawer at the nurse's station for Ensign Phillips' use.

Dorothy was indignant; she felt this was a punishment. Not that she minded having something to do, but the inference that she was falling down on her job rankled. As did the subtle implication that she was behaving in a manner unsuitable for a nurse—and a young woman engaged to another man—by spending so much time with Chief Whittaker.

"I believe Captain Leonard is deliberately trying to find ways to be nasty to me," she confided to her cabinmate. She was disappointed in the chief nurse. Dorothy had thought she was above such pettiness.

"Once that old dragon gets it in for you, she never lets up," Micky agreed. "She used to have it in for me. But lately, I must admit, she's been real human. She sent word that I needn't report for duty until I felt all right. Of course there isn't much to do. But the good captain always manages to find something."

Micky had got over the worst of her seasickness, though she could still get woozy in a stuffy place. And she had to be careful what she ate. An excellent way, she would add, to lose those few extra pounds she had been wanting to lose for a long while.

"I can't imagine who would hand in such a report to Captain Leonard," Dorothy said. "Someone had to do it. I'm sure Captain Leonard hasn't been hiding in dark corners herself or trying to eavesdrop on me."

"There's always someone anxious to climb up into good favor by treading on the other fellow—the stool-pigeon type of character, I mean."

"I'd hate to think anyone on the staff would stoop that low."

"You'd be surprised." Micky looked knowing. "Maybe it was Cora Fielding," she suggested. "I must admit I never could warm up to that girl. She pretends to be so goody-good. That's the kind you can never trust."

Cora Fielding was the nurse who had had hysteria. For several days, she had screamed and cried, threatening to kill herself. At first it had been supposed that the hysteria was caused by facing the fact that the hospital ship would undoubtedly be engaged in combat. The realization that she was in something from which she couldn't run away—the fear of death . . .

However, it had been established that Lieutenant Fielding had been through the ordeal of war before. She had conducted herself with courage. As Micky had said of her, she was the kind of young woman—though she was quite a few years older than Micky and Dorothy—one expected good conduct from; she was quiet, kept to herself—in fact, no one knew much about her. She made no close friends, and never talked about herself.

During her period of hysteria, it was revealed that for six or seven years she had been going with a man who was studying for the ministry. Cora had stacks of letters, tied with pink ribbon, from him. She had fully expected one day to become a minister's wife.

Cora's minister—his name was Albert Something-or-Other—in his last letter had written that he had married someone else—a young woman he had met quite recently. It seemed that the girl was going to have a child and the child's father had been killed in action—and since the girl hadn't been married and would, therefore, have been disgraced in the small community where they lived, Albert had decided to give the

unborn baby his name, giving up, at the same time, his plans for being a minister.

As Cora said, he hadn't thought what such a sacrifice would do to her. For how could she ever go back home to the little village in Wisconsin and face all the people who had always thought, as she had, that Cora would some day be Albert's wife.

Cora didn't care about the girl and her problem. She didn't care whether or not a child not yet born had a name. All she cared about was herself.

She made this quite evident in her hysteria. She said terrible things about the man she was supposed to have loved. She gave him no credit for what he had given up. Of course it had been a blow, but no one had dreamed the quiet young woman could have been so vindictive.

It could have been Cora, Dorothy decided, who had carried tales to the chief nurse. Tales which she probably had dressed up. Lieutenant Fielding was also ambitious, and she would like to be in good standing with those in authority who might assist her in that climb to the top.

Ensign Phillips carried out all the suggestions contained in the note from Captain Leonard. The medicine chests were put in perfect order. Neat lists were accurately compiled. This required two successive nights. It was during the second night that Lieutenant Fielding rang to ask the younger nurse if she couldn't have a sedative. The prescribed dosage on the chart had already been administered, and Ensign Phillips said she was sorry but she couldn't give the patient another. She had offered to give her a rubdown, thinking it might help the lieutenant to relax.

"If I wanted you to rub my back, I'd have asked you to," the other nurse had snapped. Her manner had been hostile. Her eyes had flashed anger. They also had a strange look, Dorothy was to recall later—she kept batting her eyelids in the nervous habit of an extremely distraught person. She was a plain-looking young woman, in her early thirties. So plain that she probably believed that since she had lost her minister she would never have another sweetheart.

Ensign Phillips had replied that she would put in a call and ask one of the doctors if Lieutenant Fielding could have

another sedative. But it was much too soon after the last one; none could be given, even with a doctor's consent, for another three or four hours.

Cora looked sulky, but she did not argue. She asked the young ensign what she was doing carrying around such a big bunch of keys.

More to make conversation, and take the patient's mind off herself, than anything else, Dorothy told her.

"You mean Captain Leonard even let you have the key to the opiates?" Cora asked. "She must trust you a lot."

Dorothy said she hoped so, thinking to herself that it had been more a matter of putting her in her place than one of trust. At the time she didn't think there was anything strange about such a question from Lieutenant Fielding. Had she given it thought, she would have put it down as only the kind of remark a person makes to continue a conversation.

Also, her patient had seemed in a better frame of mind. She told Dorothy that if she didn't mind she could return later on in the night and give that rubdown.

"I'll be glad to," Dorothy said. "Only I hope next time I make my rounds I'll find you sound asleep."

Cora's face darkened again. "Not much chance. I haven't slept for weeks—I doubt if I ever have a natural sleep again. So don't forget to check on that sedative, too. And I would prefer a hypo. They're much quicker-acting than anything else."

The ensign said she wouldn't forget. She had put in a call and had got Tommy Simms. She must have aroused him from a good night's sleep because he was very cross. He told her that Lieutenant Fielding was not to be given anything more for her nerves. "It's right there on her chart," he said. "She's been doped up for the last few days. It's high time we got her off of it."

"But if she can't sleep—" Dottie had ventured, knowing that she was going against ethics to question anything a doctor ordered. She had felt sorry for Cora. That haunted, desperate look in her eyes.

"Give her some warm milk—or one of those soda tablets which she can believe contains some sedative," Dr. Simms

returned in the same grumpy tone. "I won't be able to go back to sleep, either, now."

"I'm sorry, Dr. Simms." Dorothy's reply had been sugar-sweet, for she said to herself that that was part of a doctor's duties—he had to expect his sleep to be broken now and then. She was sorry that Tommy had turned out as he had; he used to be so nice. Love, she had decided as the night wore slowly on, did funny things to people. Look at Cora . . .

Dorothy took a soda tablet with her when she went to give Cora the rubdown. The patient eyed the small white pill disdainfully, but when Dorothy urged her to swallow it with a glass of milk, she turned suddenly docile.

"Go fetch the milk then," she said, turning her face indifferently away.

It wasn't until afterward, in trying to re-create this scene, and the other events that had taken place during the night, that Dorothy realized she might have left the keys on top of the chest of drawers for the few minutes she was out of the room. She had needed both hands free to heat and carry the milk. She wouldn't have thought this a rash act on her part, if she had paused to consider, because the patient in this case also was a nurse. A nurse realized the importance of the keys; a nurse was to be trusted. And besides, it had been getting quite late—or rather, quite early in the morning—so that Ensign Phillips had been somewhat tired herself.

In thinking back, Dorothy was to recall that when she went to heat the milk she had come upon Chief Whittaker. He said he had gone into the utility kitchen, thinking a cup of hot coffee might brace him up. Dorothy, feeling a bit conscious-stricken about the cool attitude she had had to maintain toward the pharmacist's mate, offered to fix it for him.

She could have laid the keys down somewhere at this time, her back toward the table while she attended to the things on the electric grill. She did remember that Chief Whittaker had made some remark about her lugging around such a big set of keys, just as Cora had. Dorothy had given him the same reason, adding that she had finished the tasks

assigned, so she wouldn't have to carry the keys around any longer.

The chief had grunted something about the captain being a "hellion" when it came to getting extra work out of anyone, and Dorothy had put in a mild defense of the chief nurse. It didn't help to hold spite against people; it only made the person who held it uneasy and unhappy.

All of this, things said and done, seemed relatively uncomplicated in retrospect. None offered any clear picture. However, Dorothy had to reconstruct every possible angle. Because the next morning she was to be awakened from her slumbers with a summons to appear before Captain Leonard immediately.

She couldn't imagine what was so important as to call for such immediate measures. After the night she had had, she needed sleep. She could sympathize with Tommy for having been so grouchy. But of course she would have to put in an appearance—on the double, too.

Maybe, she thought, as she donned her uniform once more, regretting that it had to be the same somewhat crumpled one she had taken off only a few hours ago as the fresh laundry would not be delivered until later in the day, it was about her engagement again. She had been expecting Captain Leonard to break down and demand an explanation. Not that the chief nurse was actually "nosy"; she just believed it her duty to interfere in people's business, especially those under her. And she wasn't the type to give up on anything that concerned that precious nephew of hers. Though surely this could have waited, Dorothy thought.

If Captain Leonard had looked through Ensign Phillips as though she were transparent of late, now her stern regard bored a hole into Dorothy's very soul.

She did not, as usual, bid the young ensign to be at ease, or suggest that she should sit down. She got immediately to the matter at hand.

"Are you aware, Ensign Phillips," her voice was coldly accusing, "that one of the keys is missing from the ones I entrusted to your care?"

"One of the keys . . . Oh, but I'm sure you—I mean,

there must be some mistake!" Dorothy knew this was a feeble answer, but they were the only words that came to her. There *must* be a mistake. How could a key be missing, when they had been so securely fastened together? If one had slipped off, surely she would have heard it drop.

"I am not mistaken." The captain's response held personal injury as well as condemnation. "Furthermore, it is the key to the narcotics closet. So it could well turn out to be a serious matter."

"I see," Dorothy said.

"Since you are responsible for the key being lost, Ensign Phillips, I expect you to find it."

"Yes, Captain Leonard. I—I'll certainly do my best." If the chief nurse believed the key to be lost, Dorothy hardly felt as though she could offer another explanation. How could she come out and say that the key might have been stolen? How could she accuse anyone of such an act, without proof?

"I'll assign someone else for your hours tonight," the captain remarked in that same unyielding tone, her dark eyes continuing to bore through the young nurse. "I shall expect you to give your entire time to recovering the key—*and to begin such a search at once.*"

"Yes, Captain Leonard," Dorothy said once more, but not too meekly. For she felt she was being accused of something she hadn't done—she knew she hadn't lost that key. But how could she prove that, either?

She had no idea where to begin her search, except to try to cover every step she had taken the night before. She could question Lieutenant Fielding, but she would have to wait until later to seek out the pharmacist's mate and talk with him.

Her careful search revealed nothing, as she had foreseen. She enlisted the aid of several members of the crew, all seemingly eager to be of service to such a pretty young officer. She didn't tell anyone, naturally, which key it was that was missing. There had been no need for the chief nurse to caution her about this. For if the wrong person should find such a key, he might not return it.

No one found any sign of anything even resembling a key.

As for Dorothy's hope of seeing Cora and questioning her,

this didn't work out, either. Lieutenant Fielding was sleeping, after a night of restlessness, and no one had the heart to disturb her. And when Dorothy finally saw Chief Whittaker, after waiting around until he went on night duty, he wasn't of any assistance, either.

"I don't remember your laying the keys down anywhere," he insisted. "Sure, I asked you about them. Just out of curiosity . . . Say, you don't think I took them!"

"Of course not," she assured him, seeing his quick indignation.

"Sorry I can't be of any help." Chief Whittaker had the air of a man who resented being implicated, even slightly.

There was nothing for Dorothy to do except to try again to see Cora.

She was awake this time; her dinner tray had just been brought to her. And Dr. Simms was leaving, having just completed a check-up of this patient.

"Dr. Simms says I'm much better," Cora told the young ensign. "He thinks I can go back on duty in another day or so. He said, however, I wasn't to do so until I felt up to it; he wants me to be completely well and strong."

"That's right, you should be," Dorothy agreed. She drew up a chair to sit down. Goodness knows, what with tramping over this big ship all day, after only a couple of hours' sleep, she felt as though her legs were about to buckle under her.

She was glad that Cora was better, and she hated to upset her again. Yet it was absolutely necessary—for how could she ever face Captain Leonard again unless she found that key?

"Aren't you early?" the lieutenant asked. She was applying herself to her tray as though she had recovered her appetite. She had only pecked at her food for days. "You usually don't come on night duty until the trays have been sent down again."

"I won't be on duty tonight," Dorothy said.

How should she begin? There ought to be some subtle way, but she wasn't expert in handling a situation of this kind in anything but a natural, straightforward manner.

"I don't suppose you're sorry about that," the other nurse

commented dryly. Then, after a brief silence, "Why this interest, then, if I may ask?"

"Interest?"

"In my behalf." Cora shot the younger nurse a quick glance, then turned back to her dinner. "I suppose I should be pleased you'd drop in to see me."

Dorothy heard the undercurrent of sarcasm. It could be justified; she didn't suppose many of the staff had bothered to take a personal interest in Cora's illness.

"Of course I'm interested," she said. "We all are. Everyone will be glad that you are well again, Cora."

The lieutenant gave a small sniff. She shrugged her thin shoulders. "You can't kid me," she said. "There's not a single soul on board ship who would give a tinker's damn if I had jumped overboard."

"You shouldn't say that. You shouldn't feel that way." Dorothy felt a surge of pity that anyone should be so bitter, or so forlorn. Impulsively she reached over to lay a hand on one of Cora's thin ones. "There are lots of people who would care—if you'd let them, Cora. I for one."

"Is that why you came to see me?"

"Well . . ." she had to be honest, "maybe not this time. Though I would have if I'd thought you wanted me to."

"Why *did* you come, then?"

Put so directly, this wasn't easy to answer. Especially since Dorothy had caught that same haunted look in the other young woman's eyes. And once again she noticed the nervous batting of the eyelids.

She hesitated, hating as before to bring up the subject of the key. Finally she said, "There *was* a reason, Cora. I lost something last night. I thought you might be able to help me find it."

"Lost something . . . How could I possibly help you?" There was that slight shrug of the thin shoulders again. Cora didn't look up from her plate to meet the other nurse's eyes.

"It was one of the keys I had with me when I was in here. I thought you might remember if I laid them down."

"Why should I? I wasn't watching you . . . Just what do you mean?" The lieutenant pushed her tray aside, and turned

a hostile look on Dorothy. "I was in bed, trying to get some sleep. I wasn't interested in anything you were doing."

"But you did ask me about the keys—remember?"

"I did not!"

This denial was so prompt that it aroused a slight suspicion once more in Dorothy's mind.

"But you did," she insisted. "You even said something about the key to the narcotics closet. I don't mean, Cora, that I attached any significance to that—"

"Just what do you mean then?" Cora pulled herself to an upright sitting position. "You just said yourself it was a perfectly natural question. What do you mean," her plain face darkened, "coming in here pretending to be interested in how I felt, saying you'd like to be friends with me, then throwing such things in my face?"

"I only wanted your help . . ."

"You won't get any help from me—ever," the older nurse broke in heatedly. Her face was distorted, her eyes wild-looking. "Get out of here—get out right now. And if you come back to pester me again, I'll report you. Don't think I won't! You may think you're such a favorite with everyone, from the CO and Captain Leonard on down, but when I tell them how two-faced you really are, and what kind of nurse—getting a sick patient all riled up over nothing . . . Get out, I said!"

She raised up now as though looking for something to throw at Dorothy.

"I'll go," Dorothy said, rising hurriedly, but speaking as calmly as she could. She wasn't afraid for herself, but she knew it was dangerous for Cora to become so upset. In spite of Tommy Simms, she was convinced that Cora was very near a complete breakdown.

She had, therefore, nothing to tell Captain Leonard about the lost key. She couldn't suggest to the chief nurse that Lieutenant Fielding might be so mentally deranged that she wasn't morally responsible for her actions. By this time, no doubt, Captain Leonard had received Dr. Simms' report that Cora was practically well again. The chief nurse—or anyone else, for that matter—couldn't be expected to believe a nurse's opinion over a doctor's.

Yet Dorothy couldn't help feeling certain that Cora knew something about the missing key. Otherwise, why should she have become so angry, almost hysterical, again? Most likely Cora had been quiet and responsive when Tommy Simms saw her. Or so cunning that she had managed to convince him that she was her old self again.

There was even another angle: Tommy was smarting under the treatment he had received from Micky; Cora was ill because the man she was to have married had married someone else. Couldn't it be possible that these two would find themselves sympathetically inclined toward each other? Cora might have flattered the young intern—she had remarked how very nice he was—and, having had his masculine ego assuaged, Tommy might not have examined her as carefully as he should have.

But it was out of the question for Dorothy to wrap up such a package as this and hand it to Captain Leonard. There was nothing upon which to base such findings except her own sixth sense—which Grandpa insisted some folks were endowed with.

CHAPTER TEN

The key turned up the next morning. It was returned to Dorothy by one of the men who had tried to help her find it the day before.

As she came out of her cabin, intending to start another seemingly hopeless search for the missing article, a sailor stepped up to her.

"Excuse me, please." He saluted smartly, respectfully "I wondered if this could be the key you were looking for, maybe."

"Where on earth did you find it!" Dorothy exclaimed, accepting the key he held out to her. Of course she couldn't tell if it was the right one until she had tried it, but there would scarcely be more than one missing key.

"In the pocket of a nurse's uniform," the boy said. "You see, since I work in the laundry I thought I'd take a good look through everything. Seeing as how you were so upset and all, Miss—I beg your pardon, Ensign, I mean."

His face had turned red. He had a pug nose and large ears that stuck out like handles from his head, but in this moment Dorothy thought he was perfectly beautiful.

"I don't know how to thank you," she told him warmly. "It was wonderful of you to go to so much trouble."

"It was no trouble at all," he returned bashfully, looking down at his feet, which were unusually oversized too. There had been admiration in his bright blue eyes as well as respect.

"It couldn't have been one of my uniforms," Dorothy said. She hadn't put her laundry down the chute yet. Also, she was confident that if the key had been in the pocket of the uniform she had worn on duty, or the fresh one she had put on later in the day, she would have known it.

"I don't know about that," the boy said. "But that's where it was—tucked away in a pocket. It's good it didn't go through the wash, though maybe it would have showed up if it had."

"I doubt that," Dorothy said. "I do wish I could thank you properly. You have no idea how grateful I am. Will you please tell me your name?"

Perhaps the boy thought she had something in mind such as a reward, for he hung his head again and mumbled a name that sounded like Summerville.

"Perhaps you'll write it down for me?" But she didn't have a pencil, and neither did he. "What's your first name?"

She understood that plainly enough, as the boy said it was Bill. There must be a lot of Bills around, but with the last one something that sounded like Summerville, she ought to be able to pick out the right Bill when the time came. She thanked him again, anxious to try the key.

But before she had time to carry out her intention, someone else approached her. It was Tommy Simms.

He didn't waste any time, but told Ensign Phillips she was wanted immediately in the CO's quarters.

"Now what?" she asked.

Tommy stared past her in a grim way that was anything but encouraging.

"You'll find out soon enough," he said. "You'd better come with me now, Ensign Phillips."

The key would have to wait. But Dorothy was determined to make absolutely sure it was the right one before she told the chief nurse, or anyone else, that it had been found.

She was to find out that the matter she had been summoned about was even more serious than a missing key.

Captain Leonard was also in the Commanding Officer's quarters, as was Captain Daley, the chief surgeon with the hospital unit. They were seated around a table. Each one returned the young ensign's salute, but no one told her she could be "at ease."

"I assume that you are aware, Ensign Phillips, that Lieutenant Fielding has been a very ill patient?"

It was Captain Harding, the CO, who put this question to Dorothy. He was a short, stocky man with heavy white eyebrows and white hair; he could look as benevolent as Santa Claus and was well liked by everyone; now, however, he wore a stern expression.

"Why, yes—I am. I have been attending Lieutenant Fielding on night duty." She hesitated; then added, "In fact, I consider her condition much graver than others seem to realize."

"Just what do you mean by that?"

Dorothy hesitated again. It never hurt to tell the truth, she decided. "Well, what I meant was that although the last time I saw the lieutenant she told me she was well, and had practically been dismissed, I didn't think she was. She seemed very excited, distraught, in my opinion."

Dorothy still didn't know what this was all about. She felt as though she were on trial for something.

"Did you report your opinion to anyone?"

"No, sir—I did not."

"May I ask why not?"

"Well, I felt that it was not my place to do so."

"Why not? You were the only nurse on duty—in charge during that shift." If possible, the CO looked sterner than

ever. None of the others wore a smile, either, or anything remotely resembling one.

"She—the lieutenant—told me that Dr. Simms had just been with her and had told her she could be dismissed in a day or so." Dorothy didn't want to put Tommy on the spot, but what else could she say?

"Is this so?" Now the CO addressed the young intern.

Tommy cleared his throat. He gave Dorothy a quick look, as though to ask her why she was trying to draw him into it; then he said that yes, it was true. He had examined Lieutenant Fielding. In his opinion she was well enough to be placed back on duty. "However," he added, "I assured her she need not report for duty until she herself felt completely well and able to do so."

At this point it was the chief nurse who took over the questioning. She had received a brief nod from Captain Daley. Her dark eyes bored through the young nurse. "Did Lieutenant Fielding ask you for a sedative or a hypodermic?"

Dorothy said yes, but that she hadn't given any. She related what had taken place; her conversation with Dr. Simms in regard to administering a sedative; the rubdown she had given, along with the soda tablet and warm milk.

"And you gave her no sedative?" This question was repeated by Captain Daley. The way he said it showed that he doubted the young ensign's statement.

"No, sir." Dorothy felt the swift color surging into her face. She couldn't see why they didn't come to the point. If they were accusing her of something, why didn't one of them say so? The object seemed to be to make her as uncomfortable and apprehensive as possible. Perhaps so she would admit she was guilty.

But guilty of what? If this were not the Navy, she would have blurted out the question.

"Are you aware, Ensign Phillips," Captain Daley asked, "that Lieutenant Fielding was given such an overdose of sleeping medicine that it was only by a miracle her life was saved around three o'clock this morning?"

Dorothy gasped, then strove to compose herself. "No, sir. I was not on duty last night."

"Why not?"

Dorothy explained about the missing key; that she had been relieved from duty in order to find it. She knew that everyone present was aware of this. Yet she was required to give the information in minute detail. Again because this was the Navy.

"Did you find the key?" the CO asked.

Dorothy hesitated only briefly. She hadn't intended telling anyone that the key—or *a* key—had been found, but the situation had changed. She told them about the key the sailor had given her. "However," she added, knowing she might not be believed, "I'm sure the key couldn't have been in one of my uniforms." She went on to explain that she hadn't sent down her laundry.

"Are you suggesting that someone else put the key in the pocket of another nurse's uniform?"

Dorothy nodded. Her mouth, by this time, was so dry she couldn't speak. She wondered how ill Cora was. Was there still the danger that she might not recover from the overdose of sedative? Had the unhappy, disillusioned nurse tried to take her own life again? A wave of pity for the other girl swept over Dorothy.

"Lieutenant Fielding will be all right," the chief nurse stated bluntly. "Fortunately, Dr. Daley was able to save her life. Another ten minutes and it would have been too late. But now that she will recover, Lieutenant Fielding claims it was you, Ensign Phillips, who administered the drug. She claims you visited her, when you were off duty, and that when she told you she must have some rest, you brought her this medicine—the medicine that nearly cost Lieutenant Fielding her life.

"What have you to say to this?" Captain Leonard finished; then, after a silence during which the young ensign did not reply, she repeated her last question, "What have you to say, Ensign Phillips?"

Dorothy had been too stunned to speak. Why would Cora deliberately tell such a lie—one that placed Dorothy in such a terrible light? Would anyone believe the truth? It would be Cora's word against hers. But the truth was the only hope Dorothy had.

"I can only tell the truth," she said quietly. It was odd,

but it had seemed to Dorothy that for a quick flash she had seen her grandfather's face nodding and smiling at her, giving her encouragement. "I don't know how this terrible thing happened. I only know that I didn't give Lieutenant Fielding a sedative—only, and that was the night before, the soda tablet and warm milk."

"Are you implying that someone else—perhaps Dr. Simms—gave her the overdose?" Captain Daley barked. As a physician, he stood by the young intern. His manner stated this.

"I'm not implying anything," Dorothy said. "In my opinion, Lieutenant Fielding is mentally ill. I believe she stole the key. I don't know how, though it is possible I laid the keys down for a few minutes. Or she might have managed to take the one she wanted while I was giving her a rubdown. Anyway, I think she took the key, procured the medicine she wanted from the closet where the narcotics are kept—"

"And gave herself enough to kill several persons, I suppose!" Tommy Simms broke in. His tone and expression registered incredulity. "I assure you," he looked at the others, ignoring Dorothy, "that Lieutenant Fielding is as sane as I am. This tale Ensign Phillips has made up is fantastic! How could anyone know, for instance, which key among so many was the one to that particular lock? Or was the lieutenant just lucky in picking—stealing, as Ensign Phillips labels it—the right one?"

"You may have a point there," the CO said. He still looked very grave, yet his keen eyes, beneath their bushy white brows, met Dorothy's with a hint of sympathetic understanding in their depths. "On the other hand, we have no reason to doubt Ensign Phillips' veracity, fantastic as her story might seem.

"I suggest," he concluded, rising to show that as far as he was concerned there was nothing more to be gained by continuing the discussion, "we give the matter more time before arriving at any conclusion. Time has a way of solving most problems quite satisfactorily. I trust this meets with your approval?" His glance went from Captain Leonard, who inclined her head in agreement, to Captain Daley, who nodded also—if with less alacrity.

"What's eating you?" Micky asked when she returned from midday mess to find her cabinmate lying disconsolately on her bunk, her eyes swollen and red. "If you've been weeping over that chief gunner's mate, let me tell you no man is worth it."

Dorothy said she wished it were something as simple as being lovesick. And then she told Micky what had happened.

The other nurse let out a long, low whistle. "Boy! An inquisition like that would put anyone down in the dumps. That crazy Cora! Of course she lifted the key. She's seen them often enough to know which was which. She most likely watched Captain Leonard whenever she used it to open that closet."

"But why should Cora want to place the blame on me?"

"Because you're beautiful, sought-after, and engaged—like those gals in the soap ads." Micky grinned knowingly. "Another reason, the sort our pal Tommy would think of, is that when a person is mentally off-balance he always turns against the one he cares most about. Cora envies you, so she wishes she could be like you."

"Tommy doesn't think Cora could have taken the key," Dorothy said.

"Tommy considers himself a second Dr. Freud," Micky reminded her. "He always has to analyze everything and everybody, including himself. If he'd just follow his natural hunches, and allow other people their crazy, illogical impulses, he'd be better off."

That was what Dorothy herself had thought—that if Tommy would give in, tell Micky how much he thought of her, for example, he might win. She couldn't help being hurt that he had taken the attitude he had. But she supposed it was only reasonable to expect Tommy to take sides against a nurse he believed to be negligent in her duties.

"Besides," Micky went on sagely, "Tommy's sore. He's sore at me because I told him off for Sherlocking. He's sore at you because he thinks you fixed up the foursome for the week end. And, to get even with the dope, I told him that Keith and I were engaged, too, and that the reason we all went across the border was to try to have a double wedding —only we couldn't make the necessary arrangements."

"You didn't!" Dorothy gasped. Yet she wouldn't put it past Micky. No wonder poor Tommy was "sore."

"Sure I did. You should have seen his face!" Micky laughed at the recollection. Then she sobered and put an arm around Dorothy. "You quit your worrying and stewing, Dottie. There's always that silver lining, you know. Everything will come out all right."

"No one will ever get Cora to admit that she didn't tell the truth."

And until she did, it was Cora's word against hers. Maybe when Cora got better, Dorothy might be able to persuade her that the truth was best for all concerned. Cora would be forgiven because she had been so ill.

However, from what she knew of that young woman, Dorothy wasn't too optimistic. As the CO had said, perhaps time alone would bring the right solution to this puzzle.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

When the hospital ship received its first mail from another smaller ship that pulled alongside for refueling Dorothy had a letter from Skid.

It was a beautiful letter. So beautiful she didn't know how she could possibly answer it.

Skid wrote that he hadn't dreamed a girl like Dorothy could ever come to like him, let alone love him. He thought she was the most wonderful girl he had ever known, not just because she was so beautiful, but because she was so sincere. "The kind of girl a fellow would be proud to take home to show off to the home folks," Skid wrote.

Reading the letter, Dorothy felt a lump rise in her throat. She didn't deserve such a letter. And there was something else that disturbed her. Throughout the whole letter there was an undercurrent of fatality.

It was almost as though Skid felt that they would never meet again, that their make-believe engagement could never

become real; it was as though he knew there wouldn't be time for love.

At least not for him.

Try as she might to banish this feeling, it persisted.

And delighted as she was to have heard from Skid, to know he was all right, she found herself wishing that there might have been another letter in that mail. A letter from Keith, if not to her, perhaps to Micky. Any letter that would bring the assurance that the young lieutenant was all right, too. Yes, even if it were a letter full of his laughter—at her expense.

However, if Micky had received any word from Keith, she didn't mention it. And under the circumstances, Dorothy couldn't ask Captain Leonard if she had heard from her nephew.

She was still giving the young ensign the "cool treatment," although Dorothy had been told that the chief nurse and the doctors were all in agreement now that Lieutenant Fielding was indeed a very sick woman. Unless her condition improved, she would be removed from the hospital ship, to be placed under psychiatric observation and care.

According to Tommy Simms, who, as Micky said, considered himself an authority on such subjects, another shock might bring Cora back to normalcy. It had been a shock that had made her ill in the first place; another shock might restore her to mental health.

Dorothy wished with all her heart that this would happen. In her prayers for the other nurse she asked that it might. In spite of the lively tales he liked to spin, Dorothy's grandfather was a great believer in the power of prayer. He had taught Dorothy, from the time she was a little girl sitting on a hassock at his knees and listening wide-eyed to all he had to say, that if you had enough faith your prayers would be answered.

Cora was far too ill to be questioned further about the key and how she had acquired the narcotics. At times she had to be confined to a strait jacket; at other times she was docile, talking in a childish manner, babbling on and on about her dolls and toys.

If Dorothy had held any animosity toward the older nurse,

it was dissolved in pity now. She tried to tempt her with good things to eat, bathed and massaged her, endeavoring in every way possible to make her comfortable. It was useless to try to talk with her; Cora was in another world, one of escape from reality.

"I wouldn't fuss and stew so about Cora, if I were you, Dot," Micky kept saying. "I believe Cora is better off this way."

"How could she possibly be?"

"Well, she wanted to forget about her Albert and all the unhappiness he brought her," Micky explained. "So she took her own means of forgetting, by shutting her mind off. When her conscious mind is finally able to accept it, she'll be okay again. Of course I'm no authority," Micky admitted, "but I've worked in enough neurological wards to know that most crazy people are happy."

Dorothy didn't think such persons should be called "crazy"; they were ill. Nor could she believe they were happy. For surely oblivion wasn't happiness.

"Someone ought to write to that Albert and let him know what his 'sacrifice' did to his old sweetheart," Micky wound up.

Dorothy didn't think that that would do any good. Yet, after thinking it over, she decided it wouldn't hurt to try. She got Lieutenant Chalmers, who had shared a cabin with Cora, to go through the other nurse's belongings and find Albert's address She would write and tell him about Cora, and ask him to pray for her, too. Perhaps, as a would-be minister of the gospel, his prayers, founded on that perfect faith which all of us, try as we will, cannot always hold to, might carry more weight than hers.

Dorothy had wondered how she could ever live down the episode of the lost key. The mystery remained unsolved, yet time, as the CO had predicted, did help. The Top Brass appeared to have dropped the matter, for the time being, anyway. Tommy Simms was the only one who remained cool toward the young ensign and Dorothy knew his was a more personal grievance. The Commanding Officer and Captain Daley treated her as though nothing had gone amiss. And

Captain Leonard, when they met off duty one day, surprised Dorothy by saying that she wanted her to know that she, for one, believed in her, and in her presentation of the case.

Dorothy had felt like throwing her arms around the chief nurse's buxom figure, but of course she didn't. She managed to stammer her thanks; then she realized that this was her opportunity.

"How is your nephew?" she asked.

"Quite well—the last I heard from him," Captain Leonard said.

"Oh. Then you *have* heard from him—recently, I mean?"

"Yes—although Keith never was one to write letters." A faint smile hovered briefly around her lips. "Which reminds me—he sent his regards to you, Ensign Phillips. He especially asked me to pass them on to you. And he asked how you were. In fact," she concluded, "I believe that was his main reason for writing the letter."

"Oh, I'm sure it couldn't have been!" Dorothy felt the telltale color sweeping into her face.

Captain Leonard's next remark was unexpected and irrelevant.

"Keith isn't the sort to give up," she stated. With which, she gave the young ensign another smile and her neatly marceled gray head disappeared down the hatchway by which they had been standing.

Dottie felt that she had a good idea what the captain had meant. She was implying that the mere fact that the young woman her nephew was interested in was engaged to another man wouldn't deter Keith from getting his own way in the end.

He was just that spoiled, Dorothy decided. Which should have made her angry with him again.

But it was difficult to be angry when she felt so relieved that Keith was all right. And he had wanted Dorothy to know that he still thought about her—possibly that he still considered himself in love with her.

As if she would believe that. She had probably been the first girl who hadn't been bowled over by his fatal charm. There was his pride, that masculine ego of which he had more

than the average share. His pride would demand that he, an *officer*, must never give up trying to win a girl away from an ordinary enlisted man.

Yet strangely enough, nothing mattered except the knowledge that Keith was all right.

She went about all the rest of that day in a rosy fog. Surely, she told herself, this warm glow couldn't come from just knowing that Keith had sent her his regards.

But, at any rate, there was no longer that irritating feeling of annoyance toward him. She no longer hated the handsome young lieutenant. Now she knew that she had deliberately tried to build up that defense against him and his dark, laughing eyes. She had kept telling herself that he was spoiled and conceited, that he didn't have the right principles, when all the time, in her heart, she had known he was only young and gay, with a sense of high good humor. And that when it came to fundamentals, to a difficult task to be done, Keith would display the same courage he had shown in flying his plane.

She found herself wishing that she could tell him how she felt now.

Would she ever see him again?

That lost week end seemed to have happened in another lifetime. She wished now she not only could re-live it, but re-live it differently. Would she ever be that happy again? And would she ever, were she to live to be a hundred, forget the first time they had danced together—and that kiss?

She decided she was getting silly and sentimental. No one knew what the future held.

Yet, maybe, as Grandpa would have reminded her, this was best.

In the following eventful days, Dorothy was to realize that this was indeed so. It was far better not to know all that lay ahead.

Later that same day, nearly everyone on the hospital ship began to realize that the boat was rolling and pitching more than usual. Accustomed as Dorothy had become to this rolling sensation, she realized that this was something different.

It was almost impossible to walk a straight line, even to keep on your feet. You would suddenly find yourself bumping into things, staggering off in the wrong direction.

Dorothy decided she had been a bit premature in being so proud of her sea legs and her well-behaved stomach.

"Isn't this awful?" Micky groaned when she came wobbling into the cabin to throw herself on the lower bunk. "What the dickens do you suppose is going on? I fell down twice trying to get here. Once I thought the ship was standing on its side. Do you think it's going to sink, Dot?"

Dorothy said she hardly thought so. In a zigzagged course, she went over to look out of the porthole, but all she could see was dark, angry water.

"This reminds me of those crazyhouses in an amusement park," Micky said. She was attempting to be funny. But her face was a sickish shade of grayish-green. "You go ahead and eat if you like," she added. "I'm not going to risk the sight or smell of food."

It was time for midday mess, but Dorothy thought she would skip it too.

"It must be a storm," Micky said. "Was that thunder?"

Dorothy didn't think it had been. The sound they had heard had been more like a long-drawn-out wail; a ghostly, eerie sound. She was afraid this was something worse than a storm.

Just then the cabin started to slant and tried to stand on its side. Articles flew off the dresser, crashed to the floor. The two chairs slid over to bang against the side of the bunk.

"This must be the end of the world!" Micky moaned, clinging to Dorothy.

However, with another long roll, the cabin righted itself once more. The chairs slid back to the opposite wall. All this had been accompanied by a prolonged, agonized groaning, as though the ship itself were in pain.

Dorothy was wondering if they ought to try to go to the chief nurse's quarters, or attempt to reach the sick bay. She wouldn't be on duty until night, but she might be needed. Micky's face showed she was scared almost silly, and anyone who was ill would be even more desperately afraid.

"Do you suppose we can make it up to the next deck?" she asked. There appeared to be a lull, although that wailing sound continued. Dorothy decided it must be the wind.

"Are you nutty?" Micky asked. "We'd be washed overboard. Besides, I don't have to report for duty until mess is over."

"I was thinking about Cora," Dorothy said. "I hope Lieutenant Chalmers is with her."

"You know Cora has round the-clock nursing," Micky said. "Someone's with her. How you can worry about *her* at a time like this is beyond me! A girl who would treat you the way Cora has. Oh, oh, oh," she shrieked, her eyes widening again with fright as she grabbed for her cabinmate. "It's starting again!"

This time both of them thought the cabin would never right itself. All they could do was cling together and hope and pray.

Dorothy found herself repeating the Twenty-third Psalm, those beautiful, comforting words . . . "though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death" . . . And suddenly she realized that this might be death. The ship might not be able to plow through this storm.

She thought of her grandfather . . . How he would have relished living through such an experience—the feeling of horror, the panic, perhaps the heroism.

"We'll have something to tell our grandchildren," she said to Micky. For, miraculously, the cabin had settled back on an even keel again.

"*If* we ever live to have any grandchildren," Micky groaned. "I tell you, Dot, I think this is the end."

There was a knock on the door. Before they could answer, the door was flung open and Tommy Simms came in.

To be more apt, the young intern was practically tossed into their laps. His face was white, his mouth set. But his eyes didn't seem frightened.

"You'd better put these on," he said. He held out two bulky life jackets. "Just in case," he added, with a reassuring grin. "Don't think you'll need them. But it's orders."

"You mean we're going to have to abandon the ship?" Dorothy asked. She was amazed that she could say it so

calmly, as though leaping over the side of a huge ship was an everyday occurrence. She guessed she felt better just because Tommy was with them. There was something about the presence of a man . . .

"I won't jump into that cold water!" Micky protested. "I'd rather die right here, go down with the ship. And I never have learned how to put one of these things on right." Dorothy had already adjusted the jacket Tommy had given her, but Micky had made no effort.

"I'll help you . . . Here, stick an arm through this hole." Tommy held out the life jacket toward Micky.

She shook her red head stubbornly.

"Why not? Do as I say. I told you it's orders." The young doctor's voice was gruff.

Micky shook her head again. "You haven't got one on," she told him.

"I could only locate a couple," Tommy explained. "Put it on, I said." This time it was a command. He took one of Micky's arms and started to force it through the opening.

She burst into tears and threw both arms around his neck. "I won't!" she sobbed. "Not when you haven't got one, too. If you have to drown, I'll drown with you, Tommy."

Tommy's mouth fell open—he couldn't believe what he had heard Micky say. It was something Dorothy wouldn't have believed, either. But she could tell, from a glance at Micky's face, that the other girl meant it. It was not hysteria. That catastrophe which she once had predicted might bring Micky to her senses had happened.

At the same time, Dorothy became aware that the cabin was no longer attempting to stand on its side. It was still pitching and rolling, but now it was a sidewise, swelling motion, rather than the upside-down movement.

Tommy must have felt this difference, too. He did not attempt to take Micky's arms from around his neck, though they must be strangling him. He patted her heaving shoulder gently, murmuring little sounds of comfort.

"Never mind," he said. "You don't have to put it on if you don't want to. I think it's going to be all right. Either the wind has died down or the ship's managed to change direction. You see, we've been riding a typhoon."

"A typhoon!" Dorothy didn't know exactly what a typhoon was, but it was nothing to sneeze at, apparently.

"How—how do you know?" Micky asked. She still kept her arms around Tommy, as though she had no intention of letting him go. She looked at him with a new respect in her eyes.

"Oh, you can't be in the Navy and not learn a few things about ships and navigation." Tommy dismissed such knowledge with a shrug. The light in his eyes as he looked at Micky was something to see. His face was no longer white; it appeared to be lighted up by some inward radiance.

"I wish I could leave you two alone," Dorothy said.

As soon as she got used to this new sidewise movement, perhaps she could keep her equilibrium.

"It's all right." Tommy gave her a grin, sort of a shamefaced one as though saying he no longer felt "sore" at her. "We'll have lots of time, won't we, Micky?"

"I sure hope so," Micky said. She buried her face against his shoulder. "Why did you waste so much before? Why didn't you put your arms around me and show me how much you loved me long ago?"

She seemed to have lost sight of the fact that she had been the one to make that first advance. Dorothy had to smile at the inconsistency of such feminine reasoning. Tommy hadn't even told Micky he loved her. But it hadn't been necessary.

He told her now, apparently not caring that he had a witness.

"I never had the nerve," he said. "You kept making me so miserable. But I do love you, even if you're such a brazen little hussy, without a brain in your pretty red head. I love you very much, darling." He gave her a little shake to show that he meant this. "But you'll have to behave yourself—show me how much you love me—from here on in. Understand?"

"Yes, sir." Micky's voice was meek. She lifted her head long enough to look earnestly into his eyes.

"I'll look the other way," Dorothy said. "Go ahead and kiss her, Tommy."

She was reminded of the time when Keith had told Skid to kiss *her* goodbye.

Had the rest of the fleet been in the typhoon too? Had all of them managed to weather it?

She had to find out. She had to find out a number of things. She would try to reach the deck above, if she had to crawl on all fours.

The wind apparently had died down; there no longer was that ghostly wail that sent cold shivers down her spine. Now, it was a steady whining. And the ship no longer groaned at each onslaught. It seemed to be rolling with the sea and wind, not against them.

And she knew that neither Micky nor Tommy would notice that she had left the cabin. For the young doctor had taken her advice; he was indeed making up for wasted time. He was doing a most thorough and professional job of kissing a starry-eyed, redheaded Navy nurse.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Rounding a corner of the passageway on the deck above, Dorothy came face to face with the chief nurse.

She stopped dead in her tracks, and gasped

For Captain Leonard looked like a drowned rat.

Her blue uniform, always so well pressed and spotless, clung to her ample form in soggy folds, and little streams of water trickled down from it. Her officer's cap was crushed and rested too far over her dark eyes. Drops of water dripped from it, too. Her gray hair, always as neatly crimped as an accordion, hung in limp strands.

In short, she was a sight to behold.

Dorothy remembered to salute, trying her best to erase the amazement from her own face. "Are you all right, Captain Leonard?" she asked.

"Certainly I'm all right," the chief nurse snapped. She sounded ruffled at the suggestion that she might not be. Despite her bedraggled appearance, she somehow managed to maintain her dignity. "I've just been up on the bridge," she

added, a bit less crisply. "I managed to persuade the captain to let me, even if it *is* against regulations. I wanted to see what was going on. And I must say," her mouth twitched in one of her rare smiles, "the captain of this ship certainly knows what he's doing! It was most exciting. Why, do you know some of those waves were over fifty feet high? And at one time the wind was more than a hundred miles an hour?"

Dorothy gulped and said that no, she hadn't known. She was just as thankful she hadn't.

She wondered how Captain Leonard could be so enthusiastic; apparently she had enjoyed bucking a typhoon.

"At that," the chief nurse was saying, "we managed to steer a course away from the center of the typhoon—almost thirty-five miles. It seems a typhoon is not so unexpected during this season and in these waters in the Pacific, so the ship had had warnings."

"Just what is a typhoon?" the young ensign inquired.

"They start as a result of collision between hot and cold air." Captain Leonard seemed proud of her ability to impart a definition of this phenomenon. "The hot air rises, somewhat like bubbles blowing upward, and the cold air rushes in the empty spaces. Then, due to the rotation of the earth on its axis, the result is a rotating windstorm."

She sounded like a well-informed mariner, but it still wasn't too clear to Dorothy, although she murmured an appropriate sound to indicate it was.

"Of course, there are always certain aspects which even science has never quite been able to explain." The chief nurse nodded knowingly, sending off another spray of mist as she did so. "A typhoon is a tricky freak of nature. But with the charts these seamen make and understand, with the powerful engines and construction of our modern Navy ships, I am told that if the captain and crew keep their heads most ships can outrun or circle around even the worst of them."

Dorothy was glad that the ship they were on was so well-built and powerful. She supposed most of the fleet was. But now she could put the question that bothered her most.

"Do you believe the rest of the fleet got through safely, too, Captain Leonard?"

"According to the last radar message, every ship was all right," the chief nurse returned. "And now the barometer is falling steadily instead of rising. However, I'm going down to find out if any more messages have been relayed."

Dorothy felt an immense relief. Keith and Skid must be safe, then.

"Don't you think," she ventured, "you had better change first, Captain Leonard? Your clothes are soaked through, and you might catch cold."

She realized it was hardly the thing for a young ensign to say to her chief nurse. But Dorothy didn't want anything to happen to Captain Leonard. Her respect and admiration for the chief nurse had grown to larger proportions than before.

Captain Leonard accepted the suggestion with a wry smile. She looked down at her person as though conscious for the first time how she must look. By now the tiny streams had formed a puddle in which she stood.

"I believe I'll take your advice. I'll take a hot shower—after I visit the radio room—and then suppose you join me in my cabin for a hot cup of coffee, Ensign Phillips."

This last wasn't an order; it was a friendly request.

Dorothy was pleased, but she didn't know how to show her appreciation. She thanked Captain Leonard and said she would like that very much.

She hadn't had dinner, but hot coffee would be wonderful. And more than that, this invitation seemed to mean that Dorothy was forgiven for the key episode.

Dr. Simms must have finished kissing Ensign Brown, Dorothy decided, and she could return to her cabin. She wanted to freshen up before she had coffee with the chief nurse. Later, she'd probably take a nap before going on night duty.

Thank heaven the typhoon hadn't struck during the long, lonely hours around midnight and afterwards! She would have been terrified. She had been scared as it was, but she was a little proud that she hadn't got panicky.

Micky evidently realized this, too.

Later that same day, when Dorothy was getting dressed to go on duty and her cabinmate was getting undressed, having come off hers, Micky said as much.

"I feel like a no-good so-and-so," the redhead said frankly.

She looked as though she felt fine; she was still starry-eyed, and she had just spent the past ten or fifteen minutes telling Dorothy how marvelous it was to be in love and how simply divine Tommy was.

"Why?" Dorothy asked, glad to change the subject. "You shouldn't feel that way."

She couldn't blame Micky for being in seventh heaven. But she foresaw that from now on she would have to listen continuously to such ravings about Tommy and to how much in love her cabinmate was. When Micky did anything, she never did it halfway.

"Because I was frightened out of my wits," the other nurse went on. "I was almost paralyzed And the laugh is that I always bragged about how I would never be afraid of anything!"

"You weren't counting on a typhoon."

"But I kept asking for it—for even worse," Micky insisted. "Saying I wanted to get in the midst of all the fighting. But, you know, somehow when that comes, if it does, I still don't think I'll be quite so afraid. I think I'll remember my nurse's training then. This was different—it made you feel so helpless. It wasn't like having to think about the patient instead of yourself."

"I know," Dorothy said.

"You always do." Micky gave her a rueful grin. "You always see the other fellow's side, Dot. Like thinking and worrying about Cora, when she's been so nasty-mean to you. Oh, I know she's sick! But I couldn't be that big.

"And you didn't go about pretending you wouldn't be scared," Dorothy's cabinmate went on. "You always said you might be, and how you were afraid of any body of water and hated anything connected with war. Yet, when you had to face up to it, you were as cool as a cucumber."

Dorothy laughed. "I imagine I was every bit as frightened as you were, Micky. And I still hate war. I'll be frightened, very badly, when we get closer to it. I'll never conquer my fear of water. So, for goodness' sake, stop trying to make a heroine out of me! And quit blaming yourself."

Then she proceeded to tell Micky about Captain Leonard, as a real example of bravery

When Dorothy also told her about having coffee in the chief nurse's quarters and that it had been very pleasant, as Captain Leonard had shown her some photographs of her family and their home in Connecticut, Micky said Hump!—so that was how the wind was blowing, was it?

"I don't know what you mean." It was difficult sometimes to keep abreast with Micky's racing thoughts.

"Why, it's as plain as the nose on your face! She's trying to help her precious nephew's campaign!"

"Oh, I don't believe so!" Dorothy protested. She had thought, at the time, that Captain Leonard had been cooler toward her after that week end, but she didn't want to believe that this proof of the chief nurse's approval had anything to do with Keith.

Keith's name hadn't been mentioned, for one thing.

Micky asked what the pictures had been like. When Dorothy told her that they had been very nice indeed—and the home a stately old Colonial one with rolling green fields—Micky gave another Hump!

"I told you she was trying to impress you with Keith's background. The estate he will one day inherit. And, no doubt, with how important it is to be a Yankee and come from a state like Connecticut . . . "

"I'm sure Captain Leonard had no such idea!" Dorothy broke in. Yet she was reminded of all that Skid had told her about *his* home—the small crossroads town in Georgia, the run-down plantation and old house, the lack of funds.

She had to admit, if only to herself, that the contrast was obvious. Keith's home *had* been impressive. Anyone who lived in such a home must have plenty of this world's possessions, as well as a feeling of security.

"Don't you let her work on you!" Micky warned. "What if the man you're engaged to doesn't come from such a plush background? What if he wasn't born with that silver spoon? Or the prospects of becoming some big executive after he play-boy's his way through college and the Air Force? For I bet my best nylons Keith has always had strings pulled for him, and always will. He's got that air. The world's his oyster."

Dorothy didn't think all this was quite true. For reasons she hadn't attempted to explain to herself, she no longer thought

so badly of Keith. After all, he had won medals for valor. He wasn't a snob. He might have been spoiled, but that wasn't altogether Keith's fault.

She was a little amused that Micky's tune had changed so much. Now that the other girl was in love, she was on Skid's side, not the handsome lieutenant's. Love was what counted, not diamonds or oil wells.

"What if Skid is just an enlisted man?" Micky was bringing up every point she could think of for effectiveness "He's the man you love. Believe you me, Dot, I know now that's all any woman wants."

"I'm glad you sifted your values and found the genuine gold nugget in the bottom of the sack." Dorothy had borrowed Grandpa's manner of speech. She was glad that Micky had arrived at a truer perspective. For of course love was more important than money or social position or anything else.

With which acknowledgment, Dorothy was seized with a deep sense of guilt and remorse.

For she knew she didn't love Skid. She liked him. She might grow exceedingly fond of him. But it would never be love.

She didn't know what had brought about such sudden clarity. Probably a number of things: time in which to think things through; the closeness of death during the typhoon. A closeness which had made Micky realize she loved Tommy. The kind of love that meant one person didn't want to go on living without the other. For in spite of her fear, Micky would rather have died in Tommy's arms than to have been saved without him.

That was what love was. It would be wrong to settle for anything less.

Dorothy knew she must write to Skid and tell him this. She had made several attempts to answer his beautiful letter, but she hadn't been satisfied with any of them. Now she knew that she must tell him the truth.

She was to be everlastingly thankful that she didn't have time to write the letter. The typhoon was only a prelude of what was to come.

It was a few days later that it began. Dorothy had been trying to sleep, after her night hours on duty, when she gradually became aware of that faraway rumbling noise. She didn't have to be told what this was—the fleet was engaged in battle.

She had known, of course, that this would come. Yet her heart tightened with apprehension. It was comparable to waiting for the death of someone dear, having known all along that death would come, but with its shock none the less sudden. No matter how long the waiting, the actuality always brought that sense of unbelief. Death would not really strike down this loved one: war would really never come this close.

There was no use to try to sleep. She dressed again and went up on deck, finding others there ahead of her. All of them were straining their eyes and ears toward the horizon, with expressions that registered the same consternation Dorothy felt.

Nothing unusual could be seen, except that the sky was leaden, as though a heavy screen of thick gray smoke shut off the sun's light, and here and there were thicker, darker masses, rising like spirals toward the heavens

This meant that already some of the planes from the carriers were on fire. One could almost see the red-hot flames, hear the crackling noises. And it wasn't difficult to imagine the rest, the zooming planes, the rain of shells, the bombs. Some of the planes would crash into the sea; the air would be full of flying flak and shrapnel, the drone of planes, and the cries of men.

Yes, it was easy, and yet impossible in its full horror, to imagine what was taking place. Nor could anyone predict how long this sea battle would last—it might be hours, it might be days. Then within a matter of more hours, the survivors would be picked up and returned to their ships; the wounded given attention—and the most desperate cases, those demanding special treatment and care, would be brought to the hospital ship.

The thundering of the big guns went on all that day, throughout the night, and part of the next day. Then it ceased, as suddenly as it had begun.

It was hard to accustom oneself to the silence.

A sensation of relief lessened the tenseness that had gripped Dorothy. But anxiety took its place.

How much longer now before they would begin to come —those badly wounded boys and men—and would Skid be among them, or Keith Cameron?

The hospital ship was in readiness, every member of the staff alerted to duty. There would be no set hours; everyone would give his time unstintingly.

And among the nurses who would do their part was Lieutenant Fielding.

Tommy Simms had been right. Another shock had served to rouse her out of her world of escape.

Dorothy had seen this take place before her very eyes.

When she had gone to see if Cora was all right, she had found her sitting up in bed, her eyes wide and frightened, her hands covering both ears.

For a while she had babbled on like a child, while Dorothy endeavored to soothe her and offer reassurance.

"It's going to be over before long," Dorothy said. "It's too far away to hurt us, Cora. So there's no need for you to be frightened."

This brought little or no response from the older nurse. Which was why Dorothy sought other methods. She began to scold Cora, as though she was the child she wanted to be. She told her she was bad to carry on so, when others were in real danger. Bad and selfish and wrong.

"You ought to be ashamed," she scolded the other nurse, ashamed of herself for doing it. "You ought to stop acting like a child. Grow up—think of others. Think of Albert, who, I am sure, still loves you."

She had never mentioned that name before. But now that she had, Dorothy went on. "I wrote to him—to Albert," she told the other girl, and noticed that Cora had stopped her whining and appeared to be listening. "I asked Albert to pray for you, Cora. And I've prayed for you, too, for I am your friend. You have many friends, people who want to help you—but you must help yourself. We need you. We need the bed you are in. The men and boys who will come to us,

after the fuing is over, will all need you—the care you can give them, your interest and help."

As she spoke, unconsciously Dorothy had given Cora's shoulders several firm little shakes. When she had finished, she realized what she had done, and again she felt somewhat ashamed. But if Cora wanted to behave like a child, she ought to be treated like one.

When she answered, Cora looked directly into Dorothy's eyes. "No one could love me," she said. "So why should I love anyone or want to help them?"

"Because you can't help it," Dorothy said. "Sometimes you find out you love the very person you thought you hated." She didn't know what made her say that. "You love those who hurt you, too—if it really is love. And that takes away the hurt, Cora."

"You said you believed that Albert still loves me." Cora spoke slowly, gropingly, but a new light was in her eyes. "You wrote to him—you asked him to help me."

"And he *is* trying to help you; he's trying this very minute," Dorothy said earnestly. "Being apart can't make any difference in how a person feels and thinks, Cora—don't you understand?"

She grasped Cora's thin shoulders, but this time her touch was comforting. Her heart was full of tenderness. In that moment Dorothy believed, with perfect faith, that all those prayers had been answered—Cora was going to be all right.

"You mean, you—you can forgive me—like me?" Cora asked. She looked for a long moment into Dorothy's eyes, then dropped her gaze, bent her head and covered her own eyes with the palms of both hands. Slow tears streaked down her face.

"Of course. I forgave you long ago."

Dorothy knew, before the other nurse spoke again, what she had asked forgiveness for. Raising her head, Cora said, "I did it. I stole the key. I took the medicine. I took it to make trouble for you, Dot, as much as for myself. I thought I hated you. I had heard about how you had just become engaged, that there were two men in love with you. I hated you because you were loved by so many people, because you were

so lovely to look at and seemed so happy . . . I don't see how you can forgive me now—now that I've told you this"

For answer, Dorothy leaned down and kissed her; a kiss of warmth and affection, a kiss that answered Cora's last question better than any words.

The older girl cried, silently, quietly, for a few minutes. Then she managed a quavering smile and made an effort to wipe away her tears.

You would have expected her voice to be shaky, uncertain. It was steady and strong.

"I never had a sister," Cora said "But I have one now."

Dorothy was so filled with a jumble of emotions that all she could do was cry a little, too.

"I must go, Cora," she said, after she had dried her tears. "But I'll be back. You must rest, now. And you might try saying the Twenty-third Psalm . . . It's so beautiful and soothing."

"Say it with me before you go," Cora said.

Holding hands, the two nurses repeated the beautiful words —with the sound of the big guns still ringing in their ears.

Later, Dorothy was told that when that low grumbling stopped, Lieutenant Fielding got out of bed and said she was ready to report for duty. She would help take care of the men who needed her.

At first there was quite a bit of doubt. Captain Daley, for one, couldn't accept such a sudden cure. It might not be wise to allow anyone who had been as ill as Lieutenant Fielding had to return to duty. It was the chief nurse who finally overruled him. Every available nurse would be needed, every willing pair of hands.

"For my part," Captain Leonard was reported to have stated, "I believe that Lieutenant Fielding will carry out her duties creditably. She always was a most competent nurse. I believe we should give her a chance to prove she can be again."

Cora had gone to the chief nurse and made a clean breast of the entire episode regarding the key.

In her own fashion, Captain Leonard believed in all the younger nurses who worked under her. Everyone on the hospital staff had developed what was known as "*esprit de*

corps"; they had become a harmonious unit. You couldn't live together, work together, share everything that came along, good and bad, without such singleness of purpose.

This was to become even stronger during the days that followed, when everyone was dedicated to one task—to save the lives of the men brought to the hospital ship.

Within the next twenty-four hours the aftermath of that sea battle was to begin to show evidence. The first sight, holding all observers spellbound, was a destroyer, or rather what had been one. When first seen it had looked like an enormous red raft bobbing up and down on the dark sea. As it drifted nearer, rocking gently under the breaking waves, it was evident that it was much larger than any raft possibly could be. It was, in fact, larger than the hospital ship. There could be little doubt that it was the bottom of a huge ship, turned upside down.

The hospital ship circled around the wreck for several hours, but no survivors could be seen. And finally, as they watched, the flat red surface went under and didn't bob up again.

Other pieces of wreckage drifted by, and then there were glimpses, far on the horizon, of the task force ahead. Great lumbering battleships, some of them apparently badly crippled, carriers and tankers and destroyers, a few with dense black clouds of smoke rising from their ghostly shapes in evidence that some were still burning from the awful holocaust. Occasionally there were sudden bright flashes from exploding incendiaries. But for the most part it looked like a giant funeral pyre that would go on sending upward its columns of swirling smoke forever.

Dorothy's thoughts, as she watched, were with the men on those ships, the men floundering in the sea, still hoping to be sighted; doubtless others who had plunged with parachutes from blazing planes.

Next, after hours of endless waiting, came the intricate business of transferring the patients who were to come on board from other ships. The escort bringing the wounded could only come within a hundred yards or so of the hospital ship. When they were as near as possible, a light line was "shot" from a mobile cannon from one ship to the other.

This line was fastened securely to a hawser rope and by means of seagoing tackle a man-sized basket could be hauled back and forth.

When the sea was high, this proved even more difficult; there was the danger of the basket, with its precious cargo, being capsized into the ocean. Fortunately, no such accident occurred during any of the transfers taking place at this time.

Dorothy watched anxiously as each newcomer was placed upon a stretcher and carried below. Some, of course, were unconscious; others were half out of their minds with pain or from shock.

Dorothy strained toward each stretcher as it passed, to see if it might be Skid—or Keith. But the badly burned cases were so swathed in bandages that it was impossible to recognize them.

She was to learn from the records, not from anything familiar about face or body, that Skid—or Chief Charles Henry Hale—was among those brought aboard. She did not learn this immediately. When she did, and went to see him, no one could have known it was Skid. For Skid was one of the worst cases. He also was a hero. He had risked his life to save the life of a pilot whose blazing plane had crashed near the turret where Skid had been stationed.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Skid remained in a coma for several days. When he regained consciousness and was told he was on a hospital ship he didn't dream that it was the same one on which Dorothy was serving.

Of course there wasn't much spare time for Dorothy to sit with Skid. But the other nurses, knowing that this was the young gunner's mate to whom Ensign Phillips was engaged, tried to give her as much time at his bedside as they could.

"I think it's just too, too romantic," Lieutenant Chalmers said, during a break when a few of the nurses were having

coffee and exchanging "scuttlebutt." "Just imagine how that poor boy will feel when he wakes up to find where he is. That's why I think Dot ought to be there when he does—why, it would be just like a movie!"

"Nearly all the ones I've seen," Micky retorted, "end in a happy clinch. I don't know—seems to me it may make Skid feel worse to have Dot see him in such shape, swathed in bandages practically from head to foot . . . Lordy, it's a wonder he's alive."

"He isn't out of danger yet," another nurse remarked. "And if he recovers, he will still have a long road to go—operations and skin-grafting—for it will take plastic surgery to restore that burned face."

"Maybe he'll never look the same—maybe Dot won't be in love with him. You know," Micky added, "I'm almost as worried over her as I am over him."

She felt she had reason to be; her cabinmate went about wearing such a stricken look. She didn't talk about what had happened, although everyone else was full of tales regarding the young Chief Petty Officer's bravery.

It seemed that when the Hellcat fighter plane had crashed, it had lost a wing in grazing the gun turret. As it came to a stop, it was already smoking and oil was pouring from it. Anyone would have realized that in a matter of seconds it would go up in flames. Yet Skid had tried to drag the injured pilot to safety. He had succeeded, but in so doing he had been more severely burned than the flyer, who, incredible as it seemed, had suffered only a few bruises and scratches.

No one knew that Dorothy's stricken look was partly caused by her own conscience. Although her anxiety over Skid was great, she found herself still thinking about Keith Cameron. What if he had been the fighter pilot whom Skid had rescued? Of course he hadn't been, but it could have been Keith. Or he might have crashed somewhere where no one could save him. The Navy Rescue Service worked endlessly and tirelessly, yet there were a few examples of survivors whom they missed. A Lieutenant Commander of an Air Group was discovered after almost a week of bobbing around on the ocean in a tiny raft. He had had only a pint of drinking water. He was so sunburned he had to be treated

for first-degree burns, so weakened he could speak only in a whisper.

Suppose some such fate had befallen Keith? What if he still was alive but alone, a mere speck on the surface of the vast sea, unable to signal for help, doomed to die a slow, agonizing death?

She didn't know why such thoughts persisted in nagging at her. She shouldn't be worrying and wondering about Keith Cameron; she should be thinking only of Skid.

She was well aware of the gravity of Skid's condition; if he lived, he might never be completely well again.

How thankful she was that she had never written that letter. For of course now Dorothy knew that she must try to make it up to Skid for all that he had lost. She would let him think that she wanted to marry him.

It would be comparable to the sacrifice Cora Fielding's young minister had made. What she didn't realize was that Skid wanted no such sacrifice.

Dorothy was not at Skid's side when he came back to consciousness. Soon afterward Captain Leonard sent for her. She told the young ensign that she might spend a few minutes with Chief Hale.

"But only a few minutes," the chief nurse warned. "Don't let him try to talk. Don't say much, or get him too excited, yourself."

Dorothy's eyes filled with tears, partly from relief that Skid was better, partly because she hadn't expected such kindness and understanding from the captain.

After she had thanked her, assuring her that she wouldn't overtax the patient, Dorothy had to ask the question that seemed to spring from her heart.

"Have you heard from your nephew? Is he all right?"

The chief nurse looked at the young ensign in that shrewd appraising manner of hers. Then a faint smile touched her set lips.

"My dear," she said, "Keith is practically indestructible. We Camerons are. I haven't heard directly from him, but I can reassure you that Keith is all in one piece."

"Oh," Dorothy said, on a long-drawn breath. And then, her eyes meeting the older woman's again. "I'm so glad."

She didn't stop to think that the relief that surged through her from head to toe was uncalled for—since her interest in the young lieutenant was supposed to be only that of a friend. Nor did she realize that Keith's aunt might find such interest and concern surprising.

Captain Leonard's next remark was somewhat strange, as her remarks occasionally were.

"I suppose you are aware," she said sternly, "how critical Chief Hale's condition is. I think you ought to know, Ensign Phillips, that his chances are about a hundred to one. I am telling you this because I think you may wish to act accordingly."

"I—no, I didn't realize it was that bad." The joy that had sprung from her relief was washed away. Again she reprimanded herself for thinking of anyone but Skid. There wasn't time then to ponder the chief nurse's last comment. It was unusual for her to confide in a subordinate that a patient's chances for recovery were so slim, even more unusual to offer personal advice.

Captain Leonard's years of experience had taught her to look for causes as well as effects, for motives behind words and deeds. She knew much more about most of her younger nurses than any of them would ever have thought possible. She might be an "old dragon," unmarried, and certainly inexperienced concerning young love, but her insight could be as keen as her dark, penetrating eyes.

In fact, Captain Leonard could well have conducted a column on Advice to the Lovelorn.

When Skid saw Dorothy, looking like an angel in her white uniform, her white cap with its gold stripes a crown on her head, he thought he had passed beyond the pearly gates.

"This must be heaven," he murmured. "I sure never thought I'd make it."

"But you did," Dorothy said quickly. Tears were so near to spilling over that she had to speak hurriedly. "This isn't heaven, but it's near it—knowing that you're soon going to be all right, Skid."

He didn't answer. His eyes, as gray-green as ever, devoured her.

"I can't stay long this time," Dorothy told him. The look

in his eyes was almost more than she could bear. His eyes and mouth were all that could be seen of his face; the rest was swathed in bandages, his head bound in a white turban that made him look like a Turk. "And we musn't talk much this first time," she added. "But I'll be with you as often as I can. I'm going to help you get well, Skid darling."

Her heart was so twisted with pain for him that the "darling" came easily to her lips.

He closed his eyes a moment; beneath the covers, his bandaged hands clenched a little, the tendons tightening.

"*You would say that,*" he said. His voice was husky. He looked at her, briefly this time, then turned his head away. His head was about the only part of him that he could move. "I won't get well, Dottie. There's no use kidding me. I know how things are with me."

"But you're wrong! You don't know! Of course you're going to get well. It will take time—and patience. But we have plenty of both, Skid. And everything will work out for us, darling—just as we planned."

She unfastened the top button of her blouse and drew out the cameo pendant he had given her. "See, darling," she leaned over him, "this is our pledge . . . Just as soon as you're well again, we'll be married. That's what you must think of, Skid."

Leaning closer, she brushed his closed eyes with her lips. Then they rested lightly, tenderly, against his mouth. Her heart was so filled with pity that in this moment Dorothy believed she would some day love Skid as he wanted her to.

He opened his eyes and looked up at her. But his eyes still held despair—and knowledge. He said, "You're really an angel, aren't you, Dottie? I'll try to get well—if that's what you want me to do."

"Of course it is!" she said firmly. "No more, ever, of that other kind of talk. Promise?"

"Yes . . . No more of that kind of talk." He shut his eyes again, perhaps so that she couldn't see the thoughts behind them.

She thought that the excitement had been too much for him. "I must go now, darling," she said. "And you must rest." She bent to kiss him lightly on his bandaged head.

He said, "Thanks, Dottie . . . Thanks for trying—" And then, turning his head away, "Yes—I'll rest now. I'll remember all you've said."

She wondered what he meant by thanking her for trying. But he still was so ill, he might not know what he was saying.

She hoped he had believed that she loved him, that she was willing to marry him as soon as they could.

For she *had* meant it. She would take care of Skid all the rest of his life, if necessary. She would try to make up to him for all he had lost.

She didn't know that as soon as she left his bedside Skid opened his eyes and lay for a long while staring at the ceiling, his whole body wracked with dry sobs.

In the days that followed, Skid's recovery seemed slower than it should be. He had been placed in an oxygen tent, given blood transfusions and the wonder drugs that usually performed such miracles, but something else, apparently, had not been done.

It was Tommy Simms who guessed what that was.

When Micky told the young doctor how worried her cabinmate was because she felt that Skid wasn't doing as well as he should, Tommy said it was because Skid didn't want to get well.

"But that's ridiculous!" Micky exclaimed. "Why shouldn't he want to get well, when he knows Dot loves him? You're just trying to be analytical again, Tommy, my lad," she added teasingly. "You don't know what you're talking about."

"I'm afraid I do," Tommy answered. "Wouldn't you know if I didn't really love you, for instance? Couldn't you tell in some way, no matter how hard I tried to make you believe I did?"

"Hey!" Micky's eyes widened in protest; she pretended she was going to throw something at him. "What's eating you? You know darn' well you're nuts about me. Just you try to tell me different!"

Tommy pretended to duck the imaginary object hurled at his head. "That's exactly what I meant," he explained. "You know how I feel about you—and maybe I *am* nutty, at that. You're as sure as you are that grass is green and the

sky is blue. It's something inside that tells you. And it's my guess that Skid knows Dottie doesn't love him. He probably knows she feels sorry for him and so is willing to make the best of a bad bargain."

"I think it's just awful for you to say that!" Micky flared. She was all the more indignant because she was afraid Tommy was right. "Why, Dottie even told Skid she'd marry him now. She said they could get the ship's captain to perform the ceremony." If that wasn't proof of a woman's love, Micky didn't see what a man could ask. Skid might always be an invalid, always bear the scars of those terrible burns.

"And what did Skid say?" Tommy asked. "Did he agree to such a plan?"

"Well, no," Micky had to admit. "Dottie said he insisted that it wouldn't be fair to her. He reminded her of what she had said—that they both had plenty of time."

"He's quite a guy," Tommy commented. "And Skid is nobody's fool. Anyway, I may be wrong, but I don't believe he'll ever get well, not with all the time in the world or with Dottie willing to go through with marrying him, unless he makes up his own mind that he wants to.

"I've seen it work too often the other way around," Tommy wound up. "I've seen people without a chance in a million who were so determined to live that they did pull through by sheer will power. So if a fellow wants to die—well, nothing any doctor, or anyone else, can do will help him."

This argument was so convincing that Micky wondered if she ought to tell Dottie what Tommy had said.

But that wasn't easy to do, even when it was your best girl friend. For Dorothy still wore that stricken look deep in her blue eyes. She appeared to be living in an empty shell. She didn't have much to say; and she cried a lot in the night when she thought her cabinmate was asleep.

Micky could hear Dorothy weeping continuously and softly. It kept her awake, too; and it made her feel awful. She had supposed, of course, that her cabinmate was crying because of Skid, but now Micky began to wonder if there could be some other reason. If what Tommy guessed was true, if Dottie didn't love Skid but thought she had to marry him, it was enough to make any girl weep buckets.

Micky felt even worse because she herself was so happy. She and Tommy had about decided that they would be married when they reached Hawaii.

For that dream of Micky's, to see this tropical paradise, was about to come true.

"Bless the dear old Navy!" Micky exclaimed when she heard that Hawaii was to be the first port for the hospital ship. "You never know what the Navy will dish out next. Imagine getting to go to a place like Hawaii—getting to stay there for a while, too!"

Then she had had her Perfect Idea, as Micky labeled it. Since she and Tommy were going to be married, why not do it up in native fashion, with palm trees, leis and guitars and hula dancers! For certainly, Hawaii was the most romantic spot on the globe and therefore the perfect place for a wedding and a honeymoon.

"And you'll have to be my maid of honor!" she told Dottie. "Even if we just have a small wedding, we have to have two people for witnesses. Tommy wants Captain Daley for his best man. And we've been through so much together, Dot, I don't want anyone but you."

Dorothy, who would have preferred that Micky choose someone else, didn't see how she could refuse. She didn't want to spoil Micky's plans, or put a damper on her happiness.

When she told Skid that within another twenty-four hours they would reach Hawaii, explaining that he, with most of the other patients on the hospital ship, would be moved to another hospital where they could receive better care, his response wasn't exactly what might have been expected.

He didn't say anything for a while. Then he said, "Look, Dottie, I want you to make me a promise—will you?"

"Of course." Her reply came promptly.

"I want you to promise me," he spoke slowly, carefully, as though weighing each word, "to be happy. That's all I want, Dottie, believe me. I want you to be happy."

He had turned his head slowly so that he could look directly into her eyes. And he was smiling, for once his eyes lighting up in the old way.

"I'll be happy as soon as I know you are well again," she

said. She knew she had spoken too quickly. She should have said she was happy now, because she knew he would be well. "I mean," she amended, "I'll be perfectly happy then. And I know you're going to start getting much better as soon as we get to Hawaii!"

"That's what I meant, too," he said. "When we get to Hawaii I know I'll be all right. So don't forget your promise to me, Dottie."

His eyes pleaded in the old way, too, so that her heart turned over. She thought, Why, he is better! I've been worrying too much. He's going to be all right!

"I won't forget!" Her face lighted up, too. "And, Skid, I've already spoken to Captain Leonard. I asked if I might be transferred so I could stay on in Hawaii as long as you are kept there. And she said I could. Isn't that wonderful?"

He managed a slow inclination of his head. He closed his eyes and started to turn his face away—then, as if it was an effort, he turned to look at her again, so long that it was almost as though he would never look at her again.

"Then when you are able to be flown back," she was telling him, "I'll fly back to the States, too. For I'm never going to leave you again, Skid—not ever!"

"I know that," he said His voice was clear and steady. "I know that's the way it will be. Just as I know that everything else will be the way I want it."

She kissed him then, lightly, tenderly, as she usually did when it came time for her to leave him. And she said something she hadn't said before.

"I love you, darling—so much." Saying it, she felt it to be true. For she had come to know him so well during these long, trying hours. The man inside the boyish body.

"I love you, too—more than you know. That's why your happiness means more to me than anything else," he told her. And now he did turn away, closing his eyes.

She tiptoed away, her heart as light as her steps.

Somehow—perhaps because she had finally told Skid she loved him and hadn't had to act a part rehearsed—that weight seemed to have lifted. For the first time, during all the days and nights of anxiety and vigilance, she felt that Skid would indeed get well.

What was it he had said? That he knew everything would work out the way he wanted it to . . .

Dorothy was to remember those words. For that same night Skid died. Quietly, in his sleep—the way he wanted it to be.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Micky had been right when she had predicted that Hawaii would be the most romantic spot on earth. The skies seemed a deeper blue; the sand was so white and sparkled like diamonds; the muted whisper of the wind in the swaying palm trees was like music and flowers of the most brilliant hues—hibiscus, ginger, and orchids—were in abundance. In short, it was indeed a paradise, a fairy land, a play world.

Micky had her "native" wedding. She wore a lei of orchids with her trim white officer's suit. She said that her Navy uniform was her choice for a wedding gown because the dear old Navy had brought her and Tommy together. They stood before a bower of flowers and palms, and afterwards a group of Hawaiian boys sang the soft, sentimental tunes in their native language, accompanied by guitars. There was a feast in Hawaiian style, too; a whole roast pig in the place of honor on the table, loaded down with other dishes, including *poi*, a gruel-like substance that had to be eaten with the fingers.

Dorothy wore a lei of carnations. She was so happy for Micky that for a time she was able to put aside her own sad-

"I've got something I want to say to you," Micky whispered when it came Dorothy's turn to offer congratulations to the groom and to kiss the bride. "Don't run off until I do."

Dorothy knew that Micky and Tommy planned to slip away as soon as the party got under way, but she had almost forgotten what Micky had said until the two girls were alone in the room reserved for Micky at the Royal Hawaiian.

"I'm going to powder my nose," Micky said, "and as soon as I've made myself beauteous, Tommy and I are leaving. You know, Dot, I'm so happy I could bust. Yet I could howl, too. It's so tremendous—to think I'm actually Mrs Thomas Lee Simms!"

Dorothy smiled in sympathetic understanding. She knew how close joy and tears could be.

"What I wanted to say isn't easy," her friend told her as she re-did her lips and took off the orchid lei so that she could comb her red hair and put on her officer's hat again.

Dorothy had never known Micky to find it hard to say anything.

Micky took a long breath. "You may not remember—but I promised a certain young man one time that I'd never stand by and let you mess up your whole life. You mustn't do it, Dot. And you mustn't let anyone else do it, either."

Dorothy didn't quite know what her friend was driving at.

"I can't forget Skid, certainly not this soon, if that's what you mean," she said. "I don't want to forget him, Micky. Remembering a person who has died seems to me the only way to keep him alive."

"Maybe so," Micky returned. Then she took a deeper plunge. She might be talking out of turn, but she couldn't say goodbye to her friend without having tried. "But I don't believe Skid would want you to go around carrying a torch for him. Any more than he'd want you to wear mourning. I don't believe, Dot—and forgive me for saying it—he'd have wanted you to marry him—if he'd lived."

All the color had left Dorothy's face. "Why?" she asked. She hadn't expected such bluntness, even from Micky.

"Because you shouldn't marry a guy you don't love just because he was a hero."

"How do you know I didn't love Skid?"

"I don't—but I think Skid knew it. I have to say it—for your own good." Micky wasn't enjoying this. Goodness knows, Dot's heart was heavy enough as it was. "Skid didn't want to live," she went on. "I know—because of something Tommy said. Oh, don't get me wrong—Tommy didn't violate any professional ethics by telling me that Skid had told

him how he felt. But I just know—maybe it's that Irish in me again—that those two must have talked things out."

"What did Tommy tell you?" Dorothy asked softly.

"He told me he knew that Skid wouldn't get well, because Skid didn't want to live. I thought about telling you then," Micky added, her eyes meeting Dorothy's in the mirror. "I didn't have the courage. I'm not as long on courage as you are, Dot—or as was your Skid. He had the courage to die—because he wanted you to be happy."

She knew that that was the bluntest statement of all. But Micky felt someone had to hand it to Dorothy. She simply couldn't go on wearing that stricken look, crying into her pillow at night, living in the past.

"I wish you hadn't said that," Dorothy said. "It makes me feel almost as though, instead of helping him, I had caused Skid's death."

"A guy like Skid Hale wouldn't want to be a burden to the woman he loved. Think of that, Dot. You may not want to accept it now, but in time you will."

The way I want it, Skid had said—almost his last words. And he had made her promise to remember that all he wanted was for her to be happy. Still, Dorothy couldn't accept what Micky had told her.

"I'm ready," Micky said. "Do I look all right, Dot?" She stood up. There was no use in saying anything more. Either it would work or it wouldn't. She had tried, because she was so fond of her ex-cabinmate. But now Tommy was waiting. . . .

"You look lovely," Dorothy said. And she did; happiness had transformed the redhead into a beauty. Impulsively, Dorothy leaned forward and kissed her. She couldn't be angry with Micky, no matter how much her frankness had stung. She couldn't let anything mar this day for Micky.

Micky wasn't the only one of Dorothy's friends who was facing a bright future.

Cora Fielding was a very happy, and entirely well, young woman these days, too. For when port had been reached, the mail had brought Cora a cablegram from Albert.

Dorothy had been the first to know about it, for Cora had come straight to her.

"Albert wants me to resign from the Navy and come home," she said, and the radiance in her face was so bright that she no longer looked plain and unattractive "He says he needs me more than the Navy does. You see, the girl he married died. Only the baby lived. Albert says it's a fine boy—and he and the boy both need me."

"Oh, Cora—that's wonderful!" Cora's interest in the child—her love for the man she was to marry—would make her forget herself.

Dorothy would feel pretty much alone, with Micky married and Cora, who had become her other close friend, leaving as soon as her resignation went through. Captain Leonard had promised to pull all the strings possible to make this come about before too long.

"You know," Cora said when she told Dorothy this, "she's really a honey—not a dragon at all. Under that stiff, starched exterior beats a heart of pure gold!"

Dorothy laughed and said that she had suspected this for quite a while.

The chief nurse sent for Dorothy a few days after all the excitement of Micky's wedding had died down.

"I assume, Ensign Phillips," the captain's greeting was brusque, "you will stay on with the hospital ship."

There was, of course, no reason now for Dorothy to remain in Hawaii, a thought that still brought a tightness to her throat.

"I'd like to," Dorothy said. And then, with an impulsiveness that was usually checked in the presence of the chief nurse, "I'd like to stay wherever you are, Captain Leonard. I feel it an honor to serve under you."

"Thank you, Ensign Phillips." A faint smile hovered around Captain Leonard's stern mouth. "I feel honored that you should tell me that. Too many of us," she added cryptically, "fail to give flowers to the living. I, for one, am inclined to be like that. Yet I feel I must—in order to maintain discipline."

"I understand," the young ensign returned. And she did. She knew that the chief nurse had to maintain her dignity—

to keep herself on a pedestal, as it were—to get the best from the younger nurses.

"I believe we understand each other quite well." This time the captain didn't try to restrain that smile. Her dark eyes, meeting Dorothy's, reminded the young nurse of another pair of very dark ones that always held laughter. "I would like you to do an errand on shore for me," Captain Leonard added. "That is, if you don't mind, my dear."

Dorothy said she would be very happy to do any errand for Captain Leonard.

The chief nurse handed her a list that consisted mostly of small items of a personal nature which could be purchased at a drug or department store. She said if Ensign Phillips didn't have time to get all of them, it would be all right. And she also added that when she returned Captain Leonard would be pleased to have the young ensign come to her quarters for a cup of tea.

"If you meet anyone—any friend you'd like to bring along—please feel free to do so," the captain added. Again she made no effort to keep the warm approval from her eyes. Her manner seemed to say that from now on the chief nurse and this young ensign would often share such small intimacies as having tea together.

When Dorothy stepped off the officers' gig, someone was waiting to greet her.

She could hardly credit her eyesight—for she found herself looking into the dark, laughing eyes of Keith Cameron.

More than that, walking straight into his outstretched arms!

It didn't seem to matter that the dock was crowded with people—officers and sailors, women and children, a mingling of darker-skinned natives. The whole world could have been there.

This was where she belonged—in a certain handsome young lieutenant's arms.

"I never thought I'd see you again," Dorothy said, when she finally got her breath back. "How did you know I'd be here?"

"How do you think I knew?" Keith returned laughingly.

He hadn't changed—a bit thinner and older, perhaps, but tanned and well. "I have Aunt Nettie well trained."

"You mean she sent me on purpose?"

"Why else? You're not to bother with that list—Aunt Nettie doesn't want a single thing except for her wild nephew to settle down, marry the girl he fell in love with at first sight, and raise some more little Camerons for her to spoil."

"Keith, you shouldn't talk like that—at least, not here!"

"Then we'll go where we *can* talk." He took her arm and led her away from the swarming, noisy dock with its native girls selling the flowered leis, native boys diving for bright coins, the milling populace that seemed to be mostly Navy in their blues.

"Where are you taking me?" Dorothy asked, but she knew she would go anywhere with him willingly.

"Does it matter?" His laughing dark eyes looked down into hers. "There are so many glamorous places on this glamorous isle, my love. We could go surfboard riding, or hunt for coconuts and hack them open and drink the sweet milk, or to a cockfight—did you know that this is one place where cockfighting is legal?—or we can dance to an Hawaiian orchestra and then get moon-struck sitting under a palm tree watching the waves wash into shore.

"But the most important thing," he wound up, "is to find a place where we not only can talk, my dearest, but where I can really kiss you properly."

Whereupon, he stopped again, right where they were, to give her another kiss.

"Keith—you shouldn't!" She knew her face was scarlet; yet she couldn't protest too much. For with that first kiss, when she had walked into his waiting arms, she had known it was Keith she loved. It had been Keith all the time. Even when she had tried to believe she hated him, then had striven for indifference.

"Why not?" he asked as before. "We've got to make up for all the time we've wasted so far. You tried so hard to fight me; you can be so very stubborn, Dorothy." And then, as they walked on, arm in arm, still oblivious to their surroundings, he sobered and said, "You even tried to make me believe you were engaged to someone else. I didn't believe it

for a second, honey. You may be a lot of things, but you're not a good actress."

No, she supposed she wasn't. She had failed to act the part she had chosen toward Skid . . .

"I'm not blaming you," Keith was saying. "I'm perfectly willing to concede that Skid was the better man. I wish I could be as big. I heard all about him. From Aunt Nettie again."

"You're big enough," Dorothy said. Then, to get even, "If you are conceited and spoiled—and think you should always get your own way."

He was as big as she wanted him to be—he was the chief nurse's nephew, wasn't he?—a Cameron who never gave up, indestructible, his aunt had said.

"Maybe we ought to go call on Aunt Nettie," Keith suggested, stopping once more. He might almost have read Dorothy's thoughts. "After all, we owe her a lot."

"Of course that's where we ought to go," Dorothy agreed smilingly. "In fact, your aunt told me to bring you back for tea."

"Tea, my eye!" Keith returned. "It should be champagne, at least."

"It will be tea," the young ensign said firmly. "And you're not to kiss me in front of your aunt."

"I'll try to behave," Keith promised with a wide grin as they turned around and headed for the docks. "If I find I can't—well, we Camerons understand one another exceptionally well, my sweet! Anyhow, Aunt Nettie will know enough to allow us some time alone, after we three have tea. She's a most brilliant woman, my aunt. It was Aunt Nettie who kept telling me not to give up. She insisted all along that you were in love with me, you see."

"How could she know that, when I didn't?" Dorothy asked.

"Because," her nephew returned slyly, "she knows it would be impossible for any girl to resist me—now wait, before you get mad! I meant that that is how my Aunt Nettie figures—not how *I* did."

"And how did you figure?" she wanted to know.

"I knew, for sure, when I saw you kiss Skid goodbye," Keith told her. "That was no way to kiss the man you were

engaged to. It wasn't even a good imitation. I also knew how well you *could* kiss—remember?"

"I still say you are terribly conceited and sure of yourself, and no doubt it's your Aunt Nettie who ruined you!"

Yet she loved him. This was it. Never, in a million years, could she have loved Skid in this way.

And Skid had given her this. It was as he would have wanted it. She wished he could know how happy she was now. But perhaps he did. Dear Skid—she would never forget him.

But now, hand in hand with Keith, looking into his laughing dark eyes, as he helped her back into the launch to return to the hospital ship—this hour was all theirs, hers and Keith's.

Navy Nurse

Ensign Dorothy Phillips was beautiful; life was beautiful; her work was wonderful; and everything was right with her world—until the day, her arms laden with bundles for the Chief Nurse's surprise birthday party, she was almost run down by a carload of brash young Air Corps officers. An impudent apology, yelled by a handsome lieutenant, was the crowning insult.

Then the lieutenant appeared unannounced at the party—revealing himself as Lieutenant Keith Cameron Townsend, and the dour Chief Nurse's nephew, no less!

The fact that Dorothy was engaged didn't mean a thing to Keith. The more she snubbed him, the more persistent he became.

It takes a battle at sea—and all the suffering connected with it—for the ensign to realize that love and hate are often akin.

AN AIRMONT ROMANCE